*LOVE ME, OR LOVE ME NOT*

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BY

MRS. FRANCIS G. FAITHFULL

IN THREE VOLUMES

*VOL. I.*


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## CHAPTER I.

'A maid whom there were none to praise,
And very few to love.'

A RATHER narrow room, with gaily painted Scripture prints, big-lettered texts, and faded maps adorning the dingy buff walls, a shabby bookcase and old-fashioned desk flanking the fireplace on either side, some forms and a sprinkling of high stools ranged against the wooden wainscoting, dirty slates, copy-books, and primers littered about two long deal tables.

These, with two or three round-faced children in blue-check pinafores and an elder girl in a brown-print gown, made up the scene

on which the afternoon sun shone through an open lattice one September day. The room itself was dull and bare enough, and it could look very gloomy at times; but just now a flood of golden light was pouring in over walls, ceiling, and sanded floor, and the autumn wind was playing soft music through the vine outside.

A pleasant day, truly, and yet somewhat tantalising withal; for the brilliant sunshine and the cool breeze only suggested how much fairer and fresher it must be down in the shingly coves by the sea-shore, or up on the wide-stretching moors, than here in this by-street of dirty little Hamelford. At least, that was what they were whispering to Winifred Chace, as she leant her two elbows on the window frame between the bushy geranium plants, and pushing back a stray lock of hair from her hot brow looked out wistfully,—first at the deep blue overhead, unflecked by a single cloud, and then away towards the strip of purple moorland just visible between the chimney-pots opposite.

It was true that she had no sort of business to be sky-gazing just then, for there was plenty to do, as her aunt Rebecca had reminded her not five minutes before; but at seventeen one could not be always toiling like a galley-slave, especially in this bright autumn time, when all living things, except ill-used human beings, seemed to be taking holiday. So she made the most of her brief breathing space, and sniffed in the balmy air, and wondered whether Mark was abroad in the fishing-boat, or at work upon the nets, or waiting, perhaps, about the shore, in the vain hope of her coming.

Poor Mark! it was hard on him too, but after all he would not be so disappointed as she. He had so much more to divert him. She half wished she too were a boy, that she might go out fishing, or help him to patch up the old boat, instead of sitting, till her back and eyes ached, over the huge basket of needle-work lying in wait for her in the stuffy parlour behind the schoolroom. Four or five hours of teaching every day, hearing stupid

little children repeat their A B C, or stumble through their hymns and catechism,—surely that was bad enough without the sewing and darning, which not seldom kept her chained, as they might do to-day, till nearly dusk. It was of very little use to grumble, as she had learnt long ago; but her restlessness and weariness would bubble up now and then into impatient discontent.

She was not left many minutes to her repinings. The little scholars, who had been kept back to help her tidy up, had but just collected the stray books and pencils and laid them away in their appointed places, ready for the morrow's use, when the handle of the door leading into the inner parlour turned hastily, a fretful elderly face, framed in a close net cap, peeped round it, and a sharp voice asked in a high key,—

'Well, Freda, and how much longer do you mean to be, I should like to know?'

The girl started, for Aunt Rebecca had small toleration for any loitering.

'I'm ready,' she said, drawing in her head,

and trying, not very successfully, to infuse a certain alertness into her tone. 'I'm coming now, aunt. Children, that will do,—you can run home;' and with an unwilling step she crossed the room, and entered one much smaller, but more carefully furnished with thick woollen curtains and heavy horse-hair chairs and sofa. In the largest and easiest of these chairs, drawn close up to the window, her aunt had re-seated herself, and was now engaged in turning over a confused heap of tablecloths and towels lying in her lap. She was a tall spare woman, with grey hair, and a sour expression about the corners of her thin lips; but erect and active still, in spite of her sixty years.

'Here's work enough for a month,' she said querulously, as Freda stepped to her side and stood looking dejectedly at the motley collection, passively waiting to receive her allotted task; 'and there are you idling away the best of the daylight, as if there were nought to do. Come, fetch your thimble, and don't let me see you staring out of window again,

unless you want to be kept at your needle till ten o'clock to-night.'

There was not much temptation to stare here, Freda thought, as she drew in her chair towards the round centre table, hunted in her work-bag for needle and thread, and resigned herself to her hard fate. Even the sunshine of this day could not find its way to these back regions; and through the thick glass of the one window there was nothing to be seen but a brick wall enclosing a tiny paved yard, with a pump standing forlorn in one corner and a water-butt in another.

Little, indeed, here to attract wandering eyes, and Freda's were soon dutifully following the movements of her deft fingers, while her thoughts went forth on sundry expeditions of their own. She often exulted inwardly that the close watch kept by her aunt over her words and actions could not reach to those same thoughts. They at least were sometimes free to wander whither they listed, even when her body was held captive

in this sombre old house. They might be busy among imaginary splendours, fair ladies, and brave knights; though her eyes beheld nothing more lovely than her aunt's withered face, or the pattern of the coarse tablecloth in her hand.

There was a keen appetite for romance, a vivid fancy in this girl, although her daily life had been singularly flat and uneventful. In the rare moments she could call her own she would seize eagerly on any stray tale or ballad that came in her way, and sometimes she would carry the precious volume secretly to bed; and getting up before dawn, would fall to reading again by the first morning light, till her brain was so filled with the deeds and personages of olden times, that her aunt's summons, calling her back to the work-a-day world, came to her like the wakening from a dream.

Now, as she sat bending over her stitching, she was away in the Highlands with Flora Macdonald and daring Prince Charlie, sharing their hairbreadth escapes and wild

adventures, and picturing the Scottish lassie's triumph when she knew her hero safe at last from his vindictive foes. Freda liked to imagine herself Flora, to wonder what it would be to do and suffer for a great cause. But the hero, the Royal Stuart! Casting about among her neighbours and acquaintance, she could find no one worthy to figure in that part, unless it might be Mark.

But even as he came into her mind, she shook her head slightly with an involuntary smile. Mark was a dear good fellow, in spite of his whims and ways; and she cared more for him than for all the people in Hamelford put together, not excepting her aunt. But assuredly he was not in the very least princely or heroic. Fancy Mark, in his blue sailor's shirt, with his cap pulled over his eyes, his brows drawn together,—after a trick he had,—raising the courtiers who knelt to kiss his hand! Fancy Mark, who was apt to keep out of every one's way, and hardly ever stopped his low whistling to give a passing greeting, bowing his acknowledgments

of loyal cheers after the gracious style of Prince Charlie! And then for the long line of kingly ancestors what had poor Mark to show?

No! it would not do at all, and so his image was dismissed; and she tried to fit the cap on the comely head of a neighbouring squire, who now and then came curvetting on his gallant grey through Hamelford, distributing nods and smiles lavishly among the townsfolk.

There was nothing to disturb her reverie, for Aunt Rebecca was never prone to much converse with her, unless some domestic question exercised her mind; and the silence in the room was broken only by the slight monotonous sound of the two swiftly moving needles, the occasional rattle of the scissors, or the sharp snap of a broken thread. The eight-day clock over the mantelpiece had stopped, and Freda had no very distinct notion how the minutes were passing, till her aunt, folding up the towel she had been sedulously mending, drew out

the huge silver watch which had belonged in succession to three generations of Mortons, and pronounced authoritatively that it was nearly seven o'clock, and high time they had tea.

The sound of her voice at once put to flight the girl's visions. With a sigh that was half relief half weariness, she rose to clear the table, and help the little maid-of-all-work, who came in for rather more scoldings than fell even to her share, and whom she therefore regarded kindly as a companion in misfortune. Between them they laid the white cloth, and arranged the crockery, enduring meanwhile the rebukes elicited from Aunt Rebecca if a knife dropped or a cup clattered more than usual. But when all was ready, and she and Freda were again left alone, seated opposite to one another, the good tea and hot buttered toast softened her acerbity, and loosened the string of her tongue.

'Mrs. Porter has been asking again about those two girls of hers, but she's got her answer at last. I would not have them, and I told her so plainly.'

'Did you tell her why you wouldn't?' Freda inquired, just by way of saying something.

'Well, not in so many words, but she must be duller than I take her for if she doesn't understand. I made out that we could not manage more than twenty in the room yonder, and that's true enough; but I didn't tell her that Jane Hood and little Betsy were going away before Christmas. However she'd heard something of it, and said she was quite ready to wait a bit. So I saw that wouldn't do, and then I began to hum and haw, and talk of her girls being too old for us, till at last up she jumped and went off quite in a pet. I don't want to offend her, for she's a decent woman enough; but have the children I won't, for her husband's neither more nor less than a working gardener, and James Brook and Mr. Crofton wouldn't be best pleased, I take it, to see their daughters sitting alongside of his.'

'I don't see why they should mind,' Freda said; 'there's no harm in the little Porters.'

Her aunt shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

'You never do see the why or wherefore of anything, and never will, I believe. But you might take my word for it. When you've kept school for thirty years, as I have, you'll begin to understand——'

'Thirty years!' Freda exclaimed, looking up aghast from the tea that she had been slowly stirring, and breaking unceremoniously into the midst of her aunt's speech. 'Aunt Rebecca! you can't *really* mean that you think I shall keep school here for thirty years?'

'I'm sure I don't know why you shouldn't,' Miss Morton responded, nettled both at the interruption and at the exceeding repugnance to school-keeping evident both in eyes and voice. 'I don't see, for my part, what's to prevent it, unless you die, or—marry,' she added, after a pause, as though the latter were by far the less likely contingency of the two. To poor Freda it certainly appeared so, and her aunt's tone came in painful confirmation of her own forebodings.

'Don't you think I shall ever marry, aunt?' she asked, not one whit shyly, but with undisguised anxiety in her wide brown eyes. 'I've wondered about it sometimes. Don't you think I ever shall?' she repeated, as if entreating at least to hear her doom.

'No, if you ask me, I don't,' said Miss Morton shortly, as she poured herself out another cup of tea. 'You're not much in the way of seeing folks, and you're not the sort to take a man's fancy.'

'Why not?' asked the girl, a faint flush coming into her pale cheek at the implied dispraise.

'Well, that's my notion. I can't rightly tell you why, except that there's something odd about you. You've never a word to throw to a dog, unless it be Mrs. Cameron and Mark; and you've a temper too. You flare up all in a moment, as you did just now when I said the men wouldn't be for making love to you.'

'I didn't mean to flare up,' Freda protested, more humbly than was her wont;

'only no one ever told me I was strange and odd before.'

'I daresay not; people don't trouble themselves to think much about you one way or the other; but I've heard the neighbours say as much, and it's quite as well you should know it now, before you get your head stuffed full of all sorts of nonsensical ideas. And don't you go wasting your time in wondering whether any one means to marry you; you may get through the world just as well as if you were one of the hussies the men run crazy about; and there are many worse lives than school-keeping, let me tell you,' she added, returning to the original grievance.

Perhaps; but just then Freda could not manage to draw much consolation from this assurance. Things are, after all, what they seem to us; and to her at seventeen, it seemed that such a life for thirty, forty, or fifty years—and people lived as long sometimes—would be wholly and utterly intolerable. To her aunt, looking backward

instead of forward, it wore quite another aspect. And so she would never escape it! Aunt Rebecca said so, and Freda, albeit not over-fond of her, could not dispute the dictum.

Years ago, when they were both children eating filberts under the elm trees at the turn of the Storleigh road, Mark Cameron had promised—promised faithfully—that when he was a big man, and had sailed round the world in a ship of his own, he would come home and marry her. He had meant it too with all his heart, honest little fellow, but the one part of the project was quite as unlikely to be carried out as was the other. So Freda thought, remembering it now.

'Suppose,' she said, suddenly, wholly neglecting her bread-and-butter in her uneasiness as to her future prospects—'suppose I were to go away from here to be a teacher somewhere else, not now, but some day,—I mean when I'm older and have learnt more. I might do that, mightn't I?' It seemed to

her that such a change as this would be better than none at all.

'Yes, you might, of course; I daresay you will, just when I'm getting an old woman, past work, and shall be wanting you to look after me and the school. That's the way all the world over. There is no such thing as gratitude now-a-days! However, you are not going yet awhile, so there's no need to talk about it that I see.'

The dissatisfied, aggrieved tone jarred on the girl's quick ear. Hers was a generous nature, and easily touched.

'I won't go at all, Aunt Becky. I hadn't considered when I said it. I'll stay with you for just as long as you want me. I ought, for I know you've been good to me,' she added, after an instant's hesitation. The goodness, she remembered, had not always been of the most attractive kind.

'Pretty well for that matter. You would have come off badly if I had not brought you up and done for you; but I don't want to take any credit for that. I should not have chosen

Esther's child to come on the parish, while I'd a roof over my head and food to give her.'

'Were they so very poor?' Freda asked, rather timidly. She generally spoke of her dead parents vaguely as 'they' when she did speak of them at all, which was but seldom.

'Poor! why, there was barely enough money scraped together to bury your mother decently.'

'Father died first—didn't he?'

'Yes, more than a year before. There, don't talk about them, child. It's no manner of use being angry now they're dead and gone, but that my sober sister Esther should have been such a fool as to marry him, and she past thirty at the time, passes my comprehension to this day. Well, it's no good speaking of it. We've done tea now, and Sally had best be washing up the things.'

Freda understood perfectly that there was no more to be learnt; Miss Morton was never inclined to be communicative about former days.

'Aunt,' said she, pleadingly, as they pushed

back their chairs, and she glanced again at the now rosy evening sky, 'mightn't I just run down to Mrs. Cameron's? I wouldn't be very long. I'd be back before it gets dark; but I do so want a whiff of fresh air this lovely evening, and Mark said she'd been expecting me. Please let me go?'

Rebecca Morton was not quite proof against the eager coaxing tones, though her consent was grudgingly given.

'Yes, you may go,' she said shortly, 'though it's all rubbish about fresh air. Why, you were weeding in the garden for nigh upon an hour this morning. But there, get along; I don't want you, I'm sure.'

Freda waited no second bidding. She had her hat and cloak on in a twinkling, and was already running gaily along the pebble footway to the wooden gate opening into the street, when her aunt called her back from the schoolroom window.

'You may tell Jane Cameron that I could not get the wool she wanted in Storleigh. They are sold out of it; and—stop a minute,

child, can't you? Ask Mark to let us have some fish up here to-morrow; quite fresh, mind.'

'I won't forget.'

'And you must be in before dusk.'

'I'll take care.' And off she went again, conscious that the sunset light was beginning to fade already, and that her precious holiday moments were slipping fast away. She never heard her aunt's exclamation that she had left the gate swinging,—a very heinous offence in Miss Morton's eyes. By the time she had come out herself to fasten it, Freda was far down the steep street, threading her way between the little groups of fishermen, who lounged, pipe in mouth, about their doors this glowing evening.

Rebecca Morton stood for a few minutes, her hand on the wicket, her eyes following the slight brown figure half-angrily, and yet with a kind of softening in the hard lines of her face. What haste the child was making! how pleased she was to go! She did not look or move like that indoors. To be sure,

there was no great reason why she should, for she had not an especially easy life of it there.

And then Miss Morton began to wonder vaguely why it was that she did not better like the girl. She was not a bad child, take her altogether. She mostly did as she was bid, and she was useful enough; but somehow she, Rebecca, had never taken to her, and it was not likely that she ever would. She had found her a trouble and burden at first, and she ought never to have had the burden. Perhaps it was that which stood between them, or perhaps it was that Freda bore her father's name, and had such a look of him too sometimes. This very night when she was vexed, it might have been Paul Chace himself telling her, Rebecca Morton, to mind her own business, and leave his alone; and declaring that a Chace was a good enough match for a Morton any day.

It hadn't proved so, however; and if he hadn't died when he did, her warning to

Esther would have been likely enough to come true. As it was, her sister had good cause to rue the day when she married him. 'He's a ne'er-do-well,' so Miss Morton had told her, with him standing by, 'and he'll get tired of you before the first year's out;' and so he did. Well, at least *she* had done her duty by her sister's orphan child, and that no one could deny!

And with this consolatory reflection, she turned back to the long low red-brick house only redeemed from ugliness by the projecting eaves, and the quaint little bell-turret surmounting the red-tiled roof. A comfortable pleasant house it was in her eyes, and homelike, moreover; for her father and grandfather had lived and died in it before her.

She lingered on her way for yet another moment, to fasten back a long trailing branch of honeysuckle that had drooped across one of the latticed windows, and to gather a bunch of autumn roses—if she had a fondness for anything, it was for her carefully-tended flowers—and then she betook

herself to the arm-chair, to indulge in her evening's solace, the painstaking perusal of the county newspaper.

Cold-hearted and sharp-tempered though she was, she had still—as who has not?—some redeeming points. She tried to act up to her lights such as they were. She was honest and careful in all money matters, paying her way scrupulously and dealing fairly by her little scholars and their parents. She would do a duty, even an unpleasant one, when she fully recognised that it *was* a duty; but her standard was low and worldly, and her very virtues were near akin to vices. Her thrift had grown into avarice, her caution and prudence into cunning; and such sympathy and kindliness as might have been in her once, perhaps, had rusted through long disuse. Her joyless single life, her narrow interests, and the struggle to support respectably herself and the child whom both her pride and conscience forbade her to discard —all had combined to sour and harden a naturally selfish character.

Hers was no cheerful home for the young girl who shared it with her, and who often hungered vaguely for something beyond the daily food, the lodging, clothing, and teaching, which made up the sum-total of her aunt's benefits. Youth, health, and a buoyant spirit had hitherto stood Freda in good stead, however; and had carried her through the wearisome daily drudgery, to which there seemed no visible end.

## CHAPTER II.

'I care for nobody, no, not I,
And nobody cares for me.'

THE clock in the old square church tower, up above on the hill-side, chimed out eight as Freda halted, almost breathless, before the green door of a white cottage hardly a stone's throw from the shelving beach. It was the last house in the village, and beyond it rose the low grey cliffs, crest after crest; while just behind lay a wooded glen, through which, in stormy weather, the brook or linn, as they called it in those parts, dashed with an unceasing roar and tumult.

But the water was low just now after the long drought; and amid the pleasant

babbling that it made there reached Freda's ear, as she stood waiting outside, a slight sound from within, as of some one reading or talking very softly. No answer coming to her knock, she lifted the latch and entered. The voice did not cease even then; but the owner of it, a bronzed lad of eighteen or thereabouts clad in a sailor's knitted jersey and high boots held up his finger hastily to keep her silent, and then signed towards the great leather chair opposite, where a white-haired old woman sat peacefully dozing. Gradually he lowered his tones, carefully laid aside the large family Bible out of which he had been reading, and noiselessly crossing the room to the still open door, made Freda pass out again before him, and closed it behind them both.

'There,' he said triumphantly, when they had moved a few paces away, 'that's what I call well managed.'

'Is she ill?' asked Freda, rather puzzled at his mysterious precautions.

'Not to say ill, but she had no rest last

night. I've been trying for the past hour to read her to sleep, and she had but just dozed off. She's been fretting too, I know, though she won't own to it.'

'Fretting, Mark! that's not her way.'

'No, but there's a reason for it to-day. I'll tell you presently. I wanted to see you to-night, but I'd nearly given you up. I've a deal to say to you.'

'I couldn't get out before. Aunt kept me sewing; and now I must be going back almost directly,' she added, dolefully; 'for I promised to be in by dusk.'

'Come along, then, there's a good half-hour of daylight left still, and we'll make the most of it. We'd best go to our old seat by the bridge, and then you can just look in at Granny before you go back. Maybe she'll have awoke by that time.'

So saying, he led the way up a steep winding bit of road to an ancient stone bridge forming a single arch above the linn, which went gurgling along its narrow bed and between broken masses of rock down

into the ocean hard by. The broad stone coping of the bridge, all overgrown with velvet moss, formed a well-cushioned resting place; and while Freda settled herself there, with her back against a mountain ash whose drooping branches touched the water's edge, Mark stood beside her, absently stripping the red berries from a twig in his hand, and dropping them, one by one, to be whirled away in the current below. They had the place almost to themselves. Now and then the country folks, toiling up the hill on their way inland, would eye the pair as they went past, or some fisher lad loitering by would turn his head to look at them; but there was little curiosity or interest in the glances which came their way. Ever since they were bits of children, Mark Cameron and Freda Chace had been sworn allies, and no one thought of interfering with them.

'Now we can talk, Mark,' Freda said, looking up into his face as he stood above her. She rather wanted to see his eyes.

They generally told his moods best, and Mark was apt to have moods. He wasn't always as gay and pleasant as he might be even to her, though she was his only friend. Yet she was very proud of that distinction, and proud of Mark altogether; he was such a handsome fellow, or at least so he seemed to her. Though his face and neck were tanned by sun and sea wind, and his curly black hair was often rough and tangled, and his hands hardened with hauling ropes and pulling an oar, still nobody ever looked so well as he did. Nobody had such bright dark eyes, or such straight features; and then his mouth! When he laughed,—and he *could* laugh very merrily,—why, there wasn't such a pair of red well-shaped lips or such a set of white teeth to be seen anywhere in Hamelford. He was not laughing now. His face had a brooding almost gloomy expression, which cleared, however, as he looked round at her.

'Yes, we can talk, but I seem just to have so much to say that I don't know where to

begin. I waited for you after church on Sunday last, but you weren't there.'

'I know. Sally wanted sorely to go home and see her mother, and the poor little thing so seldom has a holiday, that I said I'd stay and mind the house if aunt would spare her. But I was half afraid you might be looking for me. I'm sorry!'

'No! don't be sorry. It was a good-natured thing to do, and I'm glad you did it. I could have come up to the schoolhouse afterwards, but I know the old lady doesn't like Sunday visiting. Do you remember how she rated me for bringing you a capful of blackberries one Sunday evening?'

'Don't I! I can taste those blackberries now. But I wish you had come, Mark. She scolds, but she would not have sent you away, and it would have been worth a scolding to get a good long time together. We so seldom do get it now. Aunt Becky keeps me closer than ever,' and she drew a long sigh.

Mark was not very sympathetic. 'She means it for your good, and she's quite right. It's far better than if she let you idle your time away, like most of the girls hereabouts.'

'I don't want to idle my time,' Freda rejoined, in rather an injured tone; 'but I can't help thinking it pleasanter to be down here by the sea with you, than cooped up with Aunt Becky in that dull little parlour, where one never sees the sun or breathes the fresh sea air.'

'Well, and you would not think half so much of the air and the sunshine and the sea, if you hadn't been "cooped up," as you call it, all day. Have done complaining, Freda; you may be glad of all the book-learning you get. I wish I had as much, instead of being the stupid, ignorant fellow that I am.'

'I don't see that you're stupid or ignorant either,' Freda protested, quite ready to defend him against himself.

'Am I not? I can read and write and

work out an easy sum, and when you've said so much you've pretty nearly done. Oh, and I've picked up a smattering of geography. But then that's my trade, or will be when I sail my own ship.'

'Ah! Mark, I wish I were like you. I wish I might be your mate when you go off on your voyages.'

'I'm sure I don't; and you would make but a poor sort of mate if you grumbled at the captain's orders as you do at your aunt's, and fidgeted to get out of the ship whenever you were at all tired of it. But there,' he added, his rough tone softening curiously as he looked down at her, 'you don't know a bit what you're wanting, or what's best for you. You'll learn in time.'

Freda was by no means sure that she liked his compassion, and she was half inclined to pout; but it took a good deal to make her really angry with Mark, and she only changed the subject rather hastily.

'You said you had ever so many things to say to me. Tell me some of them.'

'Well, first and foremost, I'm going off on a two months' trip the day after to-morrow; up as far as Liverpool, or maybe further,' he said triumphantly.

'Oh, Mark! I don't know whether to be glad or sorry; but you're glad—I know by your voice.'

'Why, yes; haven't I been wishing it this long while? It's a real bit of good luck. Mike Shaw made me the offer only three days ago, and I jumped at it. I'm sick of all this fishing off the coast and hanging about the beach. I want to get away from this place for awhile, and to see something of the world: and there's another thing I've got it in my mind to do,' he added, dropping his voice suddenly.

'What is it?' she asked, as he did not at once proceed.

'I'm coming to it by-and-by; but first I want to speak to you about Granny. You have not much spare time, I know, but will you try and look after her when you can? You see she's getting old and weakly, and

she'll miss me terribly, though she's keen for my going. Now, she's fond of you. There isn't another soul in the place whom she would care to have coming in and out; but you won't be a trouble to her, and it will make my mind easier to think she has some one to speak a word to, dear old woman, while I'm gone.'

'I'll come,' said Freda, highly gratified at the charge laid on her, and even at the qualified assertion that she would not be a trouble. 'She shan't want for care, I promise you, Mark.'

'That's right! I thought you wouldn't fail me at a pinch. And you'll find her cheery enough. It isn't often she lets herself be down-hearted; but to-day is the 8th of September,—his birthday, you know.'

Freda had no need to ask whom he meant, and neither of them spoke for some minutes. Then Mark went on, first looking cautiously round to make sure there was no one within earshot,—

'And it's *that*, Freda, makes me mad to

go. I can't hold up my head in this place till I've shown what I'm made of, and earned an honest name for myself. They won't give me a chance here; but away from this town, —where they all know it and remember it, —I'll make a chance for myself.' He spoke impetuously—fiercely.

'But, Mark, are you wanting to go for good? Don't you care to come back again at all?' she asked in dismay.

'Come back! of course I shall. For one thing, Granny's here, and she's too old to move again; and for another, they'll find out all there is against me, sooner or later, go where I will. I know that well enough; there are always plenty of spiteful tongues ready to carry such tales. Only, don't you see, I may get a start first, and fight it out. Now, here,——' he stopped abruptly, moved a step or two off, and then throwing himself down on the grassy bank by her side, tossed off his cap, lay back with his head resting on his linked hands, and began afresh; 'I'll tell you what it is, Freda, barring

Granny and you, there isn't a living creature in Hamelford that has got a good word to say for me. Boy and man; they all fight shy of me, and give me a wide berth whenever they can.'

'Isn't that partly your fancy, Mark? They are glad enough to have you for the fishing, surely.'

He laughed scornfully. 'Ay, because they can't well do without me. I'm a strong handy fellow, and there ain't many hereabouts that can handle a boat better in a heavy sea. That's the hard part of it. There are plenty of things I can do as well as any of them; things they care about too. I can sing a good song, and I can climb a tree, or lift a weight with the best; and there's not a lad in the parish but I can distance him in a race from here to the beacon up at St. Mary's Point. And I could be good company too if I chose, though I don't hang about the publics.'

'No, indeed, you don't,' she assented, as he seemed to wait for an answer.

'I'm sounding my own praises, I know, but it's truth, for all that. No one can cast a stone at me for anything I've really done, but they say I'm my father's son, and may like enough follow in his steps.'

'They don't dare to say that to your face?' she exclaimed.

'Well, no, not quite, but it comes round to me one way or another. Why, Freda, do you remember when I was a little lad of eight, and robbed that orchard out at Bembridge? Some of the big fellows took me, you know, and made me believe it would be a fine thing to scramble up the high wall and get the apples. I didn't keep one myself. I did it for the lark, and because they egged me on,—not knowing any better, till I saw how sorry and angry Granny was about it. Well, some one told that story against me not a month ago. It was the only thing they could rake up, and they made the most of it.'

'What a shame it is!' and her cheeks grew red with indignant sympathy.

'Yes, it is a cruel shame. How could I have helped all that happened when I wasn't a year old? As if it isn't bad enough for me already to have *that* disgrace to bear all my life long, do what I may.'

His brows were drawn together, and his lips compressed with strong feeling. Freda did not fully comprehend the bitterness and wrath that he was struggling to control, but she spoke out bravely the thought that his darkened face suggested.

'You say you can't hold up your head, Mark; but it seems to me you hold it high enough, and have as little to say to them as they to you.'

'I know. I tried the other plan once, but it didn't pay. I'm not one to lick the dust off anybody's shoes, or I might have come round some that way. And I'm not over and above patient either. I should have got more kicks than halfpence for my pains, and I might have done one or two of them a mischief, if they'd taunted me as they had a mind to do. So they go their way, and I go mine, and we find it's safer to leave one another alone;' and, in

truth, in his bright eyes, as he lay gazing intently up into the twilight sky, there was a dangerous look endorsing his words.

'Well, that's an old story, and it's of no use going over it now,' he went on presently. 'I mean to hold my own among the best of them one of these days, though I know there's some uphill work before me first. Granny shall have no reason to be ashamed of me, nor you either, Freda.'

'Ashamed of you? oh, Mark!' and she almost stammered in her eagerness to reassure him. 'You know—you know I never was or could be that. Why, I think more of you than anyone. And even when you are cross with me,—you are sometimes, you know,' she added, half archly, half timidly. 'I'm never cross with *you* for more than a minute.'

'I'm not always a very pleasant fellow, I know,' he admitted; 'but that isn't altogether my fault. Never mind, Freda, we'll hold together in fair weather and foul,—that's agreed, isn't it?' and he put out his hand

to her. As she held it, a sudden impulse prompted her to ask him a question that had been lurking in her mind since that evening's talk with her aunt.

'Mark, am I so very queer and unlike other people? Aunt Becky says I am, and I want to know if it's true.'

His face broke into a smile, for the first time, as he contemplated her.

'How can I tell? Perhaps you are. You're certainly not quite like the other girls in the village here; but I'm not much of a judge.'

She was half tempted to go on and tell him of her aunt's prophecy as to her future fate, but some vague instinct of reserve held her silent under the observant gaze of his dark eyes.

When he spoke again it was not about her or her looks.

'You'll take care of Granny, then, while I'm on the high seas. You'll read good books to her, and make her tea sometimes, and set her knitting straight when it gets

into a mess. That's been past me; but there's many a little thing she'll miss me for, and it's dull work for her living all alone with her heavy thoughts.'

'Indeed it is, but I'll be in and out pretty often. It's nothing of a run from our house down here; and if Aunt Becky won't give me leave, why, I shall take it.'

'She won't hinder you,' said Mark, confidently.

'What makes you so sure of that, Mark?'

'Never mind. I am pretty sure though. For one thing, she and Granny have known each other for nearly forty years, and count cousins in some far-away fashion. So she couldn't, for very shame, choose that the dear old lady should be neglected; and, besides, she never has prevented your coming about our place, unless she wanted you at home.'

'No, she hasn't,' said Freda, reflectively. 'I've wondered at it too, sometimes, for I don't think she's over-fond of Mrs. Cameron; and she's always scolding me because I keep out of the neighbours' way, and only care

to be down here. Still, she lets me come. Perhaps, after all, she's kinder than she seems, and knows that it's my greatest pleasure.'

He laughed. 'That may be or not. It doesn't much matter to us, since, as you say, she lets you come.'

He did not tell her what he privately suspected to be the cause of Miss Morton's unaccountable leniency. Mrs. Cameron had a round sum in the bank at Bradcombe; and Rebecca had more than once been heard to hint to her intimate acquaintances, that it was well worth while for Freda to keep in the old lady's good graces, seeing that she had not a single sixpence of her own, and might come in for a bit of a legacy.

It was not by any means like her usual caution, to let in the light so fully on her motives; but she had her reasons for choosing to justify an intimacy over which the gossips in Hamelford had often marvelled. There was little fear that her sayings would be carried to the ears of the deaf old woman, who rarely admitted any visitors within her dwelling;

and if Mark got wind of them, he was safe, as she truly augured, to be silent and leave things to take their course; while, as for Freda, it had been enough for her that she might spend her scanty leisure at the cottage on the beach, without her caring to question too closely the why and wherefore.

She sat now silently enjoying the peaceful evening, the mist-wreaths in the valley, the smoke softly curling up from the chimneys of the houses clustered under the hill opposite, the trickling of a tiny cascade of water over a cleft rock just below, and the gathering shadows among the trees behind them, till Mark stirred and raised himself.

'See, the moon's rising, Freda; and it's growing damp. We've outstayed our time, and you must be going homeward, or you'll get finely scolded. Come round first, though, and see whether Granny's still napping, and then I'll walk up with you.' So Freda unwillingly left her mossy throne, and strolled back with him to the cottage. The old woman was slumbering calmly as when they

had left her, and the moonbeams shone faintly on the wrinkled face,—so like Mark's in the regular features, straight dark brows, and firm-set lips, despite the wide difference of age and colouring.

Their cautious entrance did not disturb the deep, weary sleep, and Mark only lingered to draw the red curtain carefully before the window, and to trim the little oil-lamp which stood ready on the table, Freda watching him curiously the while, partly that she herself might know exactly how to discharge the small services he was about to make over to her, and partly struck by the wonderful and touching contrast between the Mark—angry, bitter, defiant, as she had seen him awhile ago—and the self-same Mark ministering like a woman to his grandmother's needs.

There was something akin to envy within her as she herself stooped and softly wrapped the woollen shawl more closely round the old woman's feet. How pleasant it must be to be so waited on by him! He was never

—no, not in his brightest, merriest hours—half so gentle or tender to her. He would speak roughly to her often, would chide her as it seemed with little or no reason. Nay, once or twice he had been downright savage with her, and his angry looks and words lived painfully in her memory still.

True, he had been right in his wrath. It had been very naughty of her to strike little Mary Brook, as she had done once, long ago, in Mark's sight; for if the child was provoking, she was, as Mark had said, a mere baby; and it had been worse than naughty, it had been mean and sly, to hide the bits of a broken plate in the garden, trusting that her aunt would not ask for it. Mark had made her dig them up and confess, and never pitied her for her bread-and-water punishment. He had been right; but he could be very hard when he chose. To-night, however, as they paced slowly up the street, he was not hard; he was kinder than usual. The thought that this would be their last walk and talk together for many a long day, was weighing

on them both—softening him, while it almost silenced her.

'Poor little Freda!' he said presently, in a half-jesting tone, as he caught sight of her grave face, lighted up by a lamp set over the chemist's door. 'You'll have to take up with some new mate, I think. You'll be as lonely as the turtle-dove we tried to rear ever so many years ago. You remember it, don't you?'

'Yes,' she remembered it very well. 'But that didn't take a new mate,' she objected, after a little pause, and speaking with a great lump in her throat. 'Don't you think I shall care as much as the turtle-dove did, Mark?'

'Not quite! at least you're not very likely, I hope, to pine away and die, though you certainly *do* look very mournful just now; it's not worth while taking it so to heart. The time will pass quickly enough.'

'To you, yes,' she said, stung by his hopeful tone. 'If I were like you, I don't suppose I should mind it any more than you do. You'll have plenty to do and to see, and I

daresay you'll be half sorry to come back again to this stupid old place.'

'I don't know about being sorry,' he began, and then broke off short, as a noisy party of young fellows, mostly sailors or fishermen like himself, came suddenly out of a beer-shop they had just passed, brushing so close against them as almost to push Freda off the narrow pathway. As she drew hastily aside to let them go by, one of the group, who had had more than a drop too much, turned sharply, and clapping his hand on her arm, exclaimed boisterously—

'Here, my maid, don't be frighted. I'm your man, and will give you an arm, and welcome.'

Before she had time to move or speak, Mark had caught him by the shoulders, and sent him reeling half-way across the street.

'Go on!' he called imperiously to Freda; and she, obedient to his bidding, hurried forward, turning her head often to see what might befall. It was growing very dark, but she could just make out that the man who had

addressed her was shaking his fist angrily in Mark's face, and that his comrades had made a ring about the pair. There was a sound of raised voices, and then a mocking laugh echoed through the quiet street. She longed to turn back and find out what was passing, but she knew she should only vex Mark, and be in his way besides. Before she had reached the school-house gate, however, he overtook her, hot and panting with the haste he had made.

'Did he hit you?' she asked, as he drew her arm within his own, causing her to quicken her pace. 'Who was it?'

'No, he knew better than that. It was Dick Miller! I wish he had hit me. Now he'll bear us a grudge instead. We oughtn't to have been so late!' He spoke in a low, irritated tone; and she, somewhat frightened, hardly knew how to reply. Not another word passed till they reached the wicket gate. Then he laid his hand upon hers as it still rested on his arm.

'Good-night, dear,' he said, 'good-bye!' and without waiting for her answering farewell, he

turned back and disappeared in the darkness. She was certainly late, and at another time her aunt's sharp reprimands would have fretted her; but now they fell on heedless ears, and she submitted readily enough to the order which sent her at once supperless to her attic bedroom.

Safely shut in there she could draw her chair close to the window, and with her hands clasped round her knees could let her thoughts have free course. And first she wanted to recall all that Mark had been saying. It was rare for him to open his heart, as he had done this evening, even to her; and she knew that he would have talked so to no one else in the world,—that even to his grandmother he braved out his troubles and mortifications.

She was feeling now as if she might have said a great deal more to him,—as if she had not made the most of his unwonted confidence. She wanted so to be a comfort to him, if she only knew how. But as they grew older, there were some things about

Mark that she did not find it quite easy to understand. Even to-night, when he had been so much gentler than usual, when he had seemed so full of friendship for her, some of his sayings had left thorns in her mind,—he was so eager to be gone; and then he had talked quite lightly and gaily of her finding some other friend to fill his place. Now, could he really think that likely? Was it possible that any fresh acquaintance could be like the old playmate—to her, at least? But perhaps with him it might be different. It must be different, or he never could have spoken of it so.

He would no doubt meet new people, and make new friends upon his travels. Indeed that was partly why he was keen to go. He found his lonely life here wearisome, because he had only her, and she could do so little to enliven it; and when he came back again perhaps he might care less about her than now. What should she do if that ever came to pass? It was not always a very bright world to her now,

spending, as she did, so many hours in that dismal house; but it would be too forlorn without Mark to scold her, and make fun of her, and confide in her.

It was quite bad enough already to have this long two months to live through before she should see him again. But in the meanwhile she might be doing something for him. Something that would show it was not 'out of sight, out of mind' with her, at any rate. She was *almost* glad he was going, that she might have a chance of proving how eager she was to fulfil his behests. She was not at all afraid of Mrs. Cameron, though most people held her in awe. She felt very hopeful that she could please her and make her comfortable; and set to work at once planning how she could manage her own business, so as to make sure of one hour's freedom at least in every day.

When she had settled that question entirely to her mind, her thoughts reverted to the evening's adventure with a surprise, in which, till now, she had found no time to

indulge. There was nothing at all wonderful in Mark's prompt measures with Dick Miller, for his temper was quick and his arm strong; but why should he care whether Dick Miller had a spite against him, when he had always hitherto snapped his fingers at Dick and all the world? It was strange; but there was no solving this riddle, so she left it alone.

She had really thought almost enough about Mark for this one evening. How he himself would open his eyes if he knew that she had been sitting idle all this time, musing about him in the dark. He never could comprehend her taste for dreaming, and was apt, moreover, to shake his head at it. He took no kind of delight in reveries and air castles. Nay, even the legends of ghosts and hobgoblins, knights-errant and love-lorn damsels—which had such a weird fascination for her—when retailed to him only provoked scornful mirth, until, in her chagrin, she was ready to complain that he was as provoking as Aunt Becky herself.

More often, however, her thoughts, when

they two were together, insensibly took their colour from his mind, and busied themselves with the living creatures around them, or the wonders of the sea and land. And they had other sympathies in common. He was no mocking listener to any true tale of peril or adventure, and it was worth a good deal to see his eyes sparkle, and to hear the emphatic 'That was a fine fellow!' which would come as his commentary on some noble deed.

Ah well! in spite of his sometime harshness and perversity, in spite of his contempt for poetry and romance, still the happiest hours of her life she owed to Mark. No one could ever take his place, unless—until—and then as the long vista of coming years stretched out before her mind's eye, and she recalled her aunt's grim prophecy, she sighed, and would fain have pictured, as she used to do, some fairy prince coming to deliver her, poor little Cinderella that she was, from this grey life of teaching and sewing.

But her fancy, when it had reached that flight, sank helplessly to earth again, and

she began to discover that she was getting chilled and tired, and that it was quite time she went to bed. Her last waking speculation was as to whether Mark would have time for one more good-bye the next day. He did not appear; and after all, as she told herself, she had not really expected him.

## CHAPTER III.

'There is confusion worse than death,
Trouble on trouble—pain on pain,
Long labour unto aged breath.'

THERE are some on whom Dame Fortune showers her good and evil gifts with an impartial hand, and who live out their lives amid alternating sunshine and storms. On others no bright ray ever falls, and the sharp blast, the heavy thunder-cloud, are all their portion. But, perhaps, a yet harder lot is theirs whose hitherto fair sky is suddenly overcast, never to clear again; and of these last, Jane Cameron was one.

She had married the man of her choice, had borne him two comely children; and she had reached middle age before she knew

what deep sorrow meant. They were living on their farm at Althorpe, in the west country, when the first blow fell, heralding those that were to follow. Their girl—they had a son and daughter—was growing up into a sunny-faced damsel, the pride of her parents' heart, when she suddenly drooped, fell ill, and died within three months.

The father never held up his head again. His wife, hiding her own heart-pangs, strove her utmost to support and soothe him; but though for awhile he went about his fields and directed his men as of old, all spirit had died out of him, and he was a bowed and broken man. Slowly, but surely, she noted his strength too failing, his step growing more feeble, his seat in the saddle exchanged for an arm-chair by the chimney corner; and before two more years had gone over their heads, she had laid him to rest by his daughter's side in the village churchyard.

Then the mother and son were left alone in the world together. He was her first born, and had always been her special dar-

ling. She was reckoned a cold woman, but he never found her so. His father had sometimes been severe with him, and this had perhaps led her to pet and indulge him more than she might else have done. But, indeed, it seemed to her impossible to deal harshly with any being so frank and bright, so full of gaiety and good-humour as this boy of hers. If he was now and then reckless and regardless of authority, it was only when his high spirits carried him away. If his chosen comrades were not always of the steadiest, it was because his daring and adventurous nature made every frolic so inviting, and his winning ways attracted even the most graceless.

So she coined excuses to her husband, and to her own heart, for each fresh escapade; and when, nevertheless, the father would shake his head and predict that these wild freaks would lead to something worse if they were left to go unpunished, she still stood between her boy and his anger, confident that the lad would work right in the

end. It could not be, so she would argue, that generous and loving as he was, he should ever go very far astray. Time and patience would make him all they longed to see him.

But now, alas! there was no further need for her to arrest the heavy hand about to strike, or hush the angry rebuke. The hand was stiffened, the tongue silenced for ever, and she was left to deal with Robert as she would. For a time all had gone well. He had been sobered by the sorrows which had fallen on his home; and the solemn warning words breathed by his father's pale lips as he lay a-dying, had awed and startled him.

He turned steadily to his work about the farm, and grew so eager over his many projects that the grey-headed labourers began to grumble at the newfangled ways, and wish for the old master back again. They even preferred something like a complaint to his mother; but she turned a deaf ear, resolved neither to check nor thwart him in his new-born industry.

She cared but little for the crops or cattle, if she could look into his blithe face and hear his voice sounding about the house and garden; and now, while the sense of her bereavement was fresh on him, he was very good to her, and would spend many an half-hour strolling with her through the fields, or chatting with her while she worked. She tried to hide from herself that, as time wore on, his interest in the farm doings visibly relaxed, and that those home evenings together which had been so precious to her were growing rarer and rarer. She would not blame him or reproach him,—she would not even remind him of her loneliness; but she kept a cheerful face, hiding her anxious soul, and waited—hoping.

By-and-by, disquieting reports of him came to her through condoling neighbours; but she accepted neither their pity nor advice, and was content to bear her burden as best she might alone. It had grown heavy, indeed, when he one day abruptly announced that he was married—secretly married—to

a girl of seventeen, a servant on a neighbouring farm. He had kept it from her as long as might be, expecting some outbreak of anger; but she only uttered one exclamation, and then, after a long silence, bid him bring his wife to her rightful home.

She was beginning to understand that the time had passed when she might hope to control or influence him. She had let the reins slip when he was a mere boy; and now that he was a man, she could not recover them again. Once more, but this time with a sadder emphasis, she repeated to herself,—time and patience. The poor little wife did not trouble either of them long. She faded and died before the first year of wedded life was out, leaving them the legacy of a baby boy—little Mark.

'You'll be good to him,' she had said, wistfully, to the grandmother, who stood beside the bed holding the three-weeks-old infant in her arms; 'I know you will, for you've been very good to me.'

And the grandmother's answer was a kiss,

first on the baby's brow, then on the dying mother's. She was a woman of few words, but she was thinking that she *would* be good to him, not only as that simple girl had meant, but by giving him the training and the discipline that she had not given to her own wilful boy. It seemed to her then that she had learnt her lesson very bitterly; but, in truth, she had not learnt it all,—there were closed pages of which she had no glimpses *yet*.

With some faint lingering of hope that this last trouble might work a change in Robert, she strove to interest him in his boy. He had once liked little children, but now the mere sight of the babe raised a host of painful remorseful thoughts, and he would scarcely look at it or touch it. He had cared for his dead wife, after his own impulsive fashion, and he knew that he had made her miserable.

So he tried, as men will try in their folly, to stifle his sorrow and his conscience, and things grew rapidly from bad to worse. Hitherto he had been, amidst all his mis-

doings, in the main a sober man; but now the demon of drink took possession of him, and one night his mother, letting him in at midnight, saw for the first time the flushed face and staggering tread which told, beyond doubt, their own miserable tale. She was weary with long watching and weeping; and as she looked at him, the self-control which had never failed her hitherto, gave way suddenly, and the pent-up torrent of her wretchedness broke forth in vehement upbraiding.

It was a bad time to have chosen, for he was in no mood to show the penitence which would instantly have softened her. He was not wholly insensible to the sting of her anger and contempt,—for contempt there was both in her face and voice, but it only helped to lash *his* temper into fierce retort. He told her plainly that she had left him alone too long to begin scolding him like a child now, and that he meant to go his own way in spite of her. At another moment he would have bitten out his tongue sooner than have so taunted her with her

forbearance; but now he was past marking the ashy cheek, the contracted forehead, which alone showed how deep the stab had gone; and, for all answer, she merely took up his candle, and saying that he were best in bed led the way upstairs.

From that hour until the end there was a gulf between the mother and son which nothing could bridge over. She loved him no less dearly than before, but she could not forget that cruel speech,—all the more cruel because so terribly true. Henceforth her lips were sealed. She asked herself bitterly what good could come of her rebukes? She had been silent when they might have availed. To interfere now was only to provoke those fierce reproaches which haunted her memory.

It never once struck her that Robert himself might have no such vivid recollection of that night's scene as she; nay, that but for her altered bearing he would altogether have forgotten it. Yet so it was. He had been sorry and abashed, when he remembered

afterwards the state in which she must have seen him; but of the words he had uttered he recalled not one, and never guessed the share they had in bringing about the cold constraint which secretly chafed him. For very shame he could not complain of the displeasure he so well merited, but it fretted him none the less. Too proud to make the first advances, he found refuge in another expedient, and hardly ever showed his face at home until far into the night.

She guessed pretty well, though she did not certainly know how most of his evenings were spent. As she kept her solitary vigils, she pictured him in the village inn—drinking, singing, gaming with the most lawless spirits of the country-side. She no longer waited for him below stairs, for he had shown impatience at her doing so as if he fancied that she meant to play the spy upon him; but, however late the hour, she never laid her head on the pillow until she had heard him safely shut into the adjoining room.

One January night she waited in vain.

The eight-day clock in the kitchen had struck twelve, one—and he had not come. She had been busying herself with some sewing, to while away the time; but at last she could no longer rest quiet, and laying it aside she began to pace the room to and fro.

The fire burnt low in the grate, and smouldered away into a heap of grey ashes. The snow lay thick on the garden paths beneath her window, deadening all sounds, so that she was fain to hold her breath to listen for the tread she longed to hear. Presently she unlatched the window, letting in the icy blast of air upon her face. She scarcely felt it. She only thought how it would chill him as he came home across the bleak common; and he had a cough too—a hard dry cough which he could not shake off, and which had long sounded ominously in her ears. He ought not to be out this piercing night.

And therewith came a yearning recollection of a long-vanished time, when he had

been a little lad, lying sick with some childish ailment, and she had nursed and tended him by night and day. Oh, if he were but a little lad now! If she could have gone and sat beside him in his crib, and put back the dark curls from his brow, and kissed his innocent merry face.

She had closed the window again, and had gone back to her chair, wrapping a cloak around her. She sat with her hands locked together, her ears on the stretch, her mind travelling backward. She was reviewing her past dealings with him, pondering the measures which might have arrested him in his mad career. She had not been powerless —she had held the purse strings, and so far he had been dependent upon her. That was a weapon she might once have used, but now such a threat would, as she verily believed, drive him from her door. And yet it might be right that she should try it. It seemed the last chance left, and she only wanted to do the best for him.

So she remained motionless hour after hour

debating within herself. The moon had set, the stars faded one by one out of the frosty sky, and the red light of the coming dawn showed in the east, but still she did not stir. A great dread was beginning to creep over her. As she looked at the first faint crimson streak that told of the opening of another day, a strange presentiment warned her that it would usher in also a terrible woe. She had left off listening now; she was waiting as if spellbound. She did not even hear the sounds of the maids stirring in the house, nor the faint tinkle of the far-off door bell; but when there came a sharp rap at her own door, and the servant girl, not waiting for permission, opened it hastily, and stood pale and wide-eyed before her, she was not surprised; she seemed to know quite well what was coming before the breathless words were uttered.

'Oh, ma'am, ma'am, Mr. Robert!'

'Yes, it is about him, I know,—is he dead?'

'Oh, ma'am, no! but they have taken him. There was a fight at the Boar's Head last

night, and a man was half killed, and Mr. Robert is in prison.'

'He may have murder on his soul.' That was her thought; but she made no outcry even then: she only asked hoarsely who had brought up the tidings.

'The innkeeper's son from the village,—he's waiting below stairs;' and the frightened girl stood aside in awed amazement as her mistress rose stiffly, steadied herself for a moment on the chair arm, and then silently made her way down the dusky staircase to the stone passage where the man was standing.

'She's a rare one,' he said afterwards, in speaking of her. 'She never gave a screech nor shed a tear, no more than if it had been no concern of hers, and yet all the while I was a-talking to her, her face and her lips were as white as a bit of paper.'

The story had been soon told. It was a sudden brawl, begun almost in sport. Two or three travellers had put up at the inn that night, and one of them, a drover from a neighbouring county, entertaining the company with

his rough wit, chose at last to turn the laugh upon young Cameron. Robert's blood, heated with drink, was up at once, and he struck the man. The blow was returned, and in a moment the whole room was in an uproar. The strangers, siding with their comrade, attempted to force Robert from the room. He resisted furiously, and two or three of his neighbours came to his aid. The riot waxed fiercer. The landlord tried in vain to interfere: he could not even make himself heard,—until, suddenly, there came a lull, and the knot of struggling men fell asunder.

Lying on the floor, between them, was one —he whose coarse joke had provoked the fray—writhing in pain, and bleeding from a deep gash in the head. Who had done it? No need to ask! Robert had been grappling with him, hand to hand, not an instant before, and had even now been dragged off him as he lay. And Robert stood, making no attempt at flight, motionless and speechless, till the police arrived. Then he went with them as one stupified. The rest dispersed as they

would; they were not wanted until they should be called to testify that they had seen Robert Cameron's hands and clothes stained with the starting blood, and a loaded cudgel lying at his feet.

This was the tale Mrs. Cameron had to hear in the grey dawn of that January morning, and every detail of it remained stamped upon her brain for evermore. Of the days and weeks that followed she had afterwards no clear impression, although at the time she appeared to those who saw and spoke with her marvellously calm and self-possessed. She took all possible measures for her son's defence—engaging the lawyers and writing the necessary letters and instructions—forgetting, indeed, no single precaution that might be of service to him. She was mindful, too, of the injured man, who lay many days hovering between life and death, provided carefully for all his needs, and saw him several times. Robert himself she saw but once; and then it was at her own urgent desire.

He had expressed no wish that she should

come to him; and yet, when they first looked at one another through the prison grating, he was more agitated than she—although a certain slight quivering about the pale lips told something of the effort her composure cost her. He seemed unable or unwilling to speak much to her; and she had settled within herself that she would ask him no questions, press him in nowise whatever. It was not till she had told all that she had done and arranged, that she ended, in a voice too low to reach the warder's ear—

'And, my boy, if we fail—if they prove it against you—surely they must believe that you did not know what your own hand was doing!'

She paused, yearning for a word, a sound of assent that might carry some morsel of comfort to her stricken soul; but, instead of any such, he flashed at her a startled, angry glance, and made answer, almost savagely—

'So you're trying to make me confess. Well, I'd best tell you at once, mother, that I'll say *nothing* one way or the other. I suppose, whether guilty or not, you'll wish me to get

off?'—but, even as he spoke, something in her face wrought in him a quick revulsion, and he went on, sadly enough—'I'm sure I don't know, though, why you should wish it. I'm not worth the trouble you're taking; I've been a curse to myself and to you too long already. But keep up your heart, mother; when I'm out of this I'll try and be a better boy—if I can, that is'—and he broke off into a long fit of coughing, which left him panting and exhausted.

'I think sometimes,' he said, as soon as he could speak again, 'that there isn't much good left in me, anyway. See here!' and he bared his right arm. 'I'm getting as thin as a whipping-post.' He was, indeed; but, in her greater anxiety, she had not noticed it till now. 'You'll only have a skeleton on your hands when they do let me out; for I shall get off, sure enough.'

Those were his last words as she parted from him. But he was wrong: he did not get off. When the day came, the case was, as his mother had foreseen, all too clear against him.

Though one or two of the actors in that unhappy scene had taken themselves prudently out of the way, there were still witnesses more than enough to the first attack and the after occurrences. The wounded man himself swore that Robert had closed with him, and that the blow on his head came from Robert's hand; and his evidence told the more, in that he gave it reluctantly, urging that he had himself provoked the quarrel.

And against all this there was nothing whatever to be brought but Robert's bare assertion that he had *not* struck the blow, and that the weapon which had inflicted it was none of his. So far he proved to be right, but it served him little; for the cudgel, as it appeared, had hung that evening close by the parlour door, and might have been snatched by any one with a quick hand and eye. There was no question as to his guilt, but there was much pity for him in the crowded court; for many there had seen him among them, boy and man, for nearly two-and-twenty years. Much pity for him, and more for his mother who sat as

near him as she might, scarcely taking her hungry gaze from his face. How those few weeks had changed him! There were deep black marks below his eyes, and a crimson spot on either sunken cheek, and his clothes hung loosely on his tall figure. And yet he had never looked half the man that he did now, in his sore extremity.

When, at length, the sentence, which all knew must come, had been pronounced—when he heard himself doomed to transportation as a felon—those who were watching his face saw in it a sudden shock of dismay, as if he alone were taken by surprise. His lips parted, and he seemed about to speak impetuously; but, collecting himself in an instant, he calmly faced the judge, and then turned to follow the warder from the dock. As he did so, his eyes and his mother's met. They had made way for her, and she was within reach of him as he stood. He leant forward, and his two outstretched hands held hers for one moment in a burning clasp.

'I was a brute to you the other day,' he

said, hurriedly; 'but I'll answer you now, mother. I hadn't any thought of harming the man like that.' They hurried him on before he could say another word; but those few seconds had been worth much to her. And there was, besides, a rising thought which in her anguish was even then giving her strange relief.

They had sentenced him for ten years—for the prime of his life, if he were fated to live so long; but he would not see ten months—hardly ten weeks of his imprisonment. She read his hectic flush, his parched lips aright; and she knew that he was treading in his sister's steps, and that ere long his freed spirit would be far from prison walls, and she be left a childless woman. Better so! Better for him and for her. Ten years of captivity would be worse to him than any death—and his suffering would be twofold hers.

But the release came even sooner than she had looked for it. Three weeks had hardly gone by when a letter from the chaplain of

the county gaol told her of the end. He had been ailing ever since the trial, and so weak that they had hesitated to remove him; but there had been no thought of immediate danger, and no marked change until one morning, in turning out of bed, he broke a blood-vessel and swooned away. He never rallied, and indeed sank so rapidly that it would have been useless to summon her. He had been only partially conscious, and too much exhausted for speech; but just before he passed away he had whispered that they were to give her his love, and bid her not be troubled at his sentence or his death. That was all. He had been very silent from his first coming, and had sometimes seemed to fancy he would not be there long. So said the chaplain, writing kindly and pityingly to the bereaved mother.

And she, when she laid down that letter, had but one petition in her heart, — that it might soon please Heaven to take her too. She must go! How could she drag on long, with her miserable memories, through the

weary hours and days? And then, as she sat shuddering inwardly at the dreary future, her hands pressed together, and her eyes blankly gazing at the opposite wall, a soft cooing reached her ear, and turning her head, she saw the chubby ten-month-old Mark beside her.

She had forgotten him altogether; and there he sat erect on the carpet, gravely sucking his thumb and watching her with fixed inquiring eyes. She snatched him up, and strained him to her with passionate fondness. Robert's child! all that was left of Robert on earth! Oh, no, she must live! she must not wish to die! Fatherless and motherless, he had no one to stand between him and the cruel world but his old grandmother.

And thereupon arose in her a new strength, new courage. Her remaining life should be devoted utterly to him. They would go away together,—turning their backs on the old house, the pleasant pastures that had grown hateful in her eyes. And far away from the neighbourhood, where Robert and his deeds still lived

in everybody's mouth, they would find some quiet humble home, where they might dwell unnoticed and undisturbed. The resolve made, she was only doubting whither to bend her steps when a mere accident decided her.

A distant cousin of hers had lately come into the country-side as the wife of a certain Paul Chace—an unsteady, improvident fellow, who, between farming a bit of sterile land on a bleak hillside near Althorpe and occasional dealings in horseflesh, earned a precarious and not too creditable livelihood. This man had been a crony of Robert's, and since the fight at the Boar's Head he had never been seen about Althorpe. No one was much amazed thereat, for he and his wife did not live too happily together, and he was always glad of an excuse for roving. There was many a shrewd guess made now by the village gossips that he would be in no haste to return.

But Mrs. Cameron read his absence differently. He had been Robert's comrade, and might have known more of his past doings

than he cared to tell. It was well that he should keep away till the trial was over, and Robert's mother thanked him for it in her heart. The village gossips were, perhaps, nearer to the truth. At any rate, on the very day that brought the news of Robert's death, Esther Chace appeared at the farm to take counsel as to a letter she had just received from her husband. It had been written from New York, and told her shortly enough that he was sick of home life; that they had made a mistake, and would be best apart for awhile—that he meant to try his luck in the backwoods, and would send her half his earnings. Meanwhile, she might do as she thought good with the land and stock. Scrawled in a corner of the sheet was one line that had passed unnoticed till Mrs. Cameron deciphered it. 'Let me know what you do, and whether Robert Cameron's out of gaol.'

Robert's mother made no spoken comment on that sentence, but it confirmed her own secret belief; and when Esther said bitterly, that a few angry words between them

were all the reason that he had for so deserting her, Mrs. Cameron thought otherwise, and could not judge the truant husband hardly. Still the two women had formed a certain liking for each other, and now the trouble which in its different ways had touched them both made a fresh link between them. Before Esther set out homewards it had been agreed that Mrs. Cameron and little Mark should return with her to the coast village, thirty miles away, whence she had come a bride hardly a year before.

So it came to pass that when little Freda Chace opened her brown eyes on the world some seven months afterwards, almost the first object on which they ignorantly rested was Mark Cameron's round sunburnt visage, as he was held up against the bedside by his grandmother.

## CHAPTER IV.

'Reach down my cloak; I'll to the quay
And see him come ashore.'

MRS. CAMERON was not a woman whom any calamities could paralyse. She knew right well that she had but reaped the bitter harvest she had blindly sown. In the dreadful time that was past, one of her keenest pangs had lain in this, that there was so little to be done that she could but stand helplessly by watching the ruin she had wrought.

But now another office opened before her, and, in the dark hour of her desolation, she set about the work that lay ready to her hand. To teach Mark the self-control that

Robert had so fatally lacked became now her ruling purpose, from the time she rose in the early dawn until she went to rest at even. Often in the silent watches of the night she would lie wakeful on her bed recalling the trifling events of the day, pondering over each word or act of hers which might have had their influence for good or evil on the boy's character.

And she had rich soil whereon to labour. She told herself sometimes mournfully, and yet not without some sort of comfort, that the earnest unselfish spirit springing up in Mark had never been in his dead father. *His* generous impetuous nature might, indeed, have been curbed and guided, but it could not have given back the same clear ring, for there had not been the true metal of steadfast resolution and endurance. And certainly it was a strange thing to see how, even as a little lad, Mark learnt to face pain and disappointment, to choose the right, and resist the wrong. Not that he was by any means a paragon. His hot temper brought him into

many a scrape; and when the lion in him was once roused, he was not always ready to follow out the maxim of forgiving and forgetting.

He was by nature so proud that his grandmother had carefully kept him ignorant of the slur resting on his name, until she dared be silent no longer lest he should hear of his disgrace from harsher lips; for their story had, in time, got wind among their Hamelford neighbours, and had borne fruit in cold glances and now and then in slighting words. Such words and glances Mrs. Cameron would readily have braved for each remaining day of her life rather than have had to open her boy's eyes. But they left her no choice, and she faced the task.

Neither of the two ever afterwards forgot how the fog had crept stealthily towards them from over the sea, and the dead leaves had fluttered slowly down on the gravel path the day they sat together in the twilight, she speaking and he listening. There had been some boyish quarrel in the school-yard

that afternoon; and Mark—he was hardly eleven years old then—had come home panting and angry, not so much at the hard knocks he had received as at the gibes and taunts he could not comprehend. His grandmother quieted and comforted him; and then when he had had his supper and the door had been secured for the night, she bade him bring his stool close to her chair beside the window; and, with her hand resting on his shoulder, told him all,—her own weak indulgence and his father's errors, touching lightly and tenderly on these but not keeping them back—and ending with his crime and punishment.

Mark neither moved nor spoke till she had finished the low-spoken narrative; and then, without a single question or remark, he said that he was tired, and would like to go to bed. She held his hand, longing to know what was passing in his mind; but he only kissed her in an absent bewildered way, and went up the steep staircase to the closet where he slept, with a slow step unlike his usual springing tread. An hour later she looked in on

him. He was lying in the darkness wide awake and quiet, but he raised himself on his elbow when he saw her light.

'Granny, are you ashamed of him and of me?'

There was an anxiety in his tone that touched her to the quick. Even already he was suffering for his father's sins. She came and knelt down by him, and spoke with a vehemence unlike her habit.

'My darling, no! I love you as I loved him, better than anything in the wide world!'

'Yes, but love isn't the same,' he answered, impatiently. 'You know the things they say—the people about here: I understand them now; I never could before. Don't you mind their saying those things and pointing at us?'

'I mind them for you, Mark, not for myself. I am long past caring what anyone may say. But, my boy! I'm afraid—I know that you will have a great deal to bear.'

'I can bear it; don't fret over that,' he said, excitedly; 'only tell me one thing, Granny. If I grow up to be a man, and do something

brave and fine, something that everyone will praise, would they forget then what *he* did? Would they leave off talking of it then?'

'They might.' She answered him doubtfully, but she could not find it in her heart to tell him how hard it was, how long it took, to wipe out the prison stain.

'Then I'll do it. I don't know how yet, but I'll do it some way; and then perhaps you'll be proud, Granny, and not ashamed, when they leave off saying bad things of my father, and say good things of me instead. Oh! I wish I were a man now—at once;' and drawing a deep breath, he lay down again. She kissed him, and bade him good-night, sighing as she thought how little he could yet picture the suffering the brand would bring to his susceptible spirit.

After that one outpouring he talked not at all to her about his father or his disgrace; and the little that he ever did say about it was to his playmate Freda Chace. It might be that the child's simple allegiance soothed him more under some rebuff or insult than his gran-

mother's sorrowful pity; or it might be that he dreaded to call up into her aged face that look of woe which it had worn when she had told him the miserable history. At any rate she would hardly have known that it still lived in his memory, but for his growing avoidance of his boy companions and his greater care for her.

It was touching to see the naturally active restless lad helping her slow steps along the beach, or fulfilling for her indoors many of the little services which generally fall to a woman's share. They had no regular servant, though a neighbour came in daily to do the rougher work of the house. They had chosen to live alone together hitherto; but of late, since she had grown more feeble, Mrs. Cameron had once or twice proposed to hire a maid, who would take all those small household duties off Mark's hands. His answer had always been an eager protest,—'Why shouldn't I do them? I've time and strength enough, and to spare.'

'Ay, but it's not man's work, my lad;

and I doubt you'll get laughed at more than enough for making the beds and helping to cook the dinner.'

'Let them laugh who like, little I care; but don't let's have strange folk living here while I'm at home to do for you;' and Mark had his way. Out of doors he might have been very forlorn but for his one faithful companion. When Freda had first begun to run alone, Mark's little hand had steadied her tottering steps, and his red lips had always been ready to kiss the bruised knees and scratched fingers; and the baby friendship had only strengthened with their growing years.

Esther Chace never rightly held up her head after she came back to Hamelford. With her it had been truly a case of marrying in haste and repenting at leisure. She did not pretend to any lingering affection for her husband; but the trials of her wedded life had told upon her strength, and she died when Freda could but lisp her name, and just too soon to learn that the marriage link, which had proved such a heavy fetter, had

been already sundered. She had not been two months in her grave, when a sailor brought home tidings that Paul Chace had breathed his last in a fever hospital at New York nearly a year before; and then Rebecca Morton knew that little Freda was wholly on her hands.

The child would have fared ill for love and kindness if it had not been for Mrs. Cameron and Mark. As she grew older the cottage on the beach became her constant refuge whenever she could escape, with leave or without, from her aunt's guardianship. If she did not find Mark there she would sit down contentedly to pore over some of the books, in old-fashioned brown leather bindings, ranged on a shelf beside the window, or she would ensconce herself on a low stool beside the chimney corner with an ancient wooden doll, once the property of dead Alice Cameron and now brought out again, at Mark's instance, for her benefit.

At such times she and Mrs. Cameron became great friends. The old lady — she was growing old now, and trouble had aged

her more than years—was not caressing in her ways to any living thing but Mark; but she felt a strong interest in her little fair-haired visitor, and showed it after her own fashion. She would watch with kindly eyes the intent childish face bent over the dolly hushed to sleep on the small knee. And it would call forth one of her rare smiles to see how, when Mark's step or whistle was heard, the doll was laid aside, and the little figure would spring up to meet him in eager expectation of a game or ramble. How delicious to both children were those holiday hours! The mushroom-gathering in the early morning, the scrambling among the rocks at low tide, the long strolls in the Melcombe woods on Saturday afternoons, and hardly less so the snug evenings by Mrs. Cameron's fireside, with the roasted chesnuts hissing on the hearth; and then the run home to the schoolhouse, through the wintry night, buffeted by the fresh sea wind, or tramping merrily over the frozen ground.

The strong contrast they formed to the

monotonous home-life—nay, the cost at which they were sometimes purchased, and the very punishments they might entail—gave them, to Freda at least, a special fascination. If there had been no shadow over Mark holding him aloof from his own kind, the boy-and-girl intimacy might perhaps have gradually waned; but from the time he was made aware of the ban under which he lay, he turned more persistently than ever to the friend who was very certain never to revile him or his dead father, and who was always ready to humour him to the top of his bent. He needed some humouring; for the fretted temper which he never vented on his grandmother, now and then showed itself to Freda in gloom or irritation.

While they were very young, her brown eyes would only follow him in ignorant wonderment when his dark hour was upon him; but as she learnt better to understand the pain that goaded him, she learnt too how to ease it, and often to win him back to his right self. None of his caprices ever shook her loving

loyalty, even though a shade of fear now and then mingled with it.

How she missed him, now that he was really off and away, sailing northward to Liverpool! And yet she was careful to keep the promise she had made him, as faithfully as if he had been by to see. Fair weather or foul she found her way daily to the white cottage, though she had not seldom to brave—what she heeded far more than wind or hail—the unsparing lash of her aunt's tongue.

Miss Morton never positively forbade her going, partly for the unspoken reasons upon which Mark had reckoned, and partly, perhaps, because she guessed that it was wiser not to strain her authority too far. But she repaid herself for her forbearance by many a crabbed speech, and at home taxed the girl more heavily than ever. Freda submitted very patiently. She did not sigh often over her labour, or crave as of old for country rambles. Even when she knew that the sun must be pouring a flood of light over the

purple heather on the moors, and that the leaves in the beach avenue at Melcombe were carpeting the ground with dusky gold, as she and Mark had often seen them,—even then she was in nowise tempted to wander up thither all alone. When he came back—then they would go. How much there would be to tell him, and to hear! How pleasant to listen to his adventures, sitting together under one of those big shady trees! She never saw a strange bird or found a new flower but the thought came that she might show it some day to Mark. She never heard a scrap of news, but the wonder crossed her what Mark would say to it.

And, in the meanwhile, was she not able to talk freely of him, as she sat or knelt by his grandmother's side, in the cozy little parlour at the cottage? In the quiet times they spent together the old lady would speak to her often and earnestly of other things beside Mark; dwelling on the drudgery that lay before her—not making light of it, but trying to show how, irksome as it seemed,

content and happiness might yet be won by doing with all her might the work that her hand found to do.

'Never mind whether it's pleasant or unpleasant,' she would say, with an emphasis that gave solemnity to her words. 'Never mind whether it hurts or tires you in the doing; only mind this, that you go straight on, turning neither to right nor left, never holding back from the duty that lies before you; and then you will never know what it is to repent that it was left undone.'

It was as though she felt constrained to testify out of the depths of her own mournful experience, to hold up her own life's tragedy as a warning to this young girl. And Freda listened; and if these sometimes seemed to her hard sayings, yet Mark, in blunter phrases, had preached to her often on the self-same text; and so the words sank in, and she went home bravely to the long seams and the dull scholars.

And meanwhile, the weeks of Mark's absence sped slowly on, lengthening from

two months to three, and then to four, and still there was no present likelihood of his return. From time to time he wrote to his grandmother; and her replies, as he told her, made him easy in staying so long away. He had been taken on for a further trip to Greenock, and he could not yet tell when he might be back; but he was in high health, and learning his trade well.

There was not much more than this to be gathered from the brief epistles, scribbled as he could find time for them at sea; but there was one little note sent to Freda from Greenock which contained some news besides. He had been there nearly a month, and he had made some friends; friends who might bring him more good than he'd ever counted on, though what it was she mustn't ask, or he tell; over which enigmatical sentence Freda puzzled longer than Mrs. Cameron.

Indeed, as the spring set in, she began to think that she wanted Mark more than did his grandmother, who was so resolved not

to be a weight upon him that she would not even own to wishing overmuch for his return. Yet there was an unusual light in her eyes, one soft February morning, as she greeted Freda by holding up an open letter.

'See here! the lad writes that he is on his way home. And it has been detained some time. He may be here before nightfall, for the wind has been fair from the north this week past.'

Freda sat down to read the hurriedly-penned lines, her heart beating fast with glad surprise.

'Oh, Granny!'—she often called her so—'we shan't know how to make enough of him.'

'Wait till he comes:' but the old woman's voice too was quivering with emotion, and she could not quite command her usual calmness. It was very hard to Freda to tear herself away, and there was some excuse that day for Miss Morton's oft-repeated exclamation that her wits had gone wool-gathering. What wonder if they had? How could she possibly master those long rows of figures, or listen

to the children droning through their primers, when Mark might be coming round the point or telling all his story to Mrs. Cameron's eager ears.

When the long hours had at length run out, and the last child had dropped its curtsy and tripped off through the wicket gate, she could endure no longer. Her aunt had gone upstairs, but it was useless to ask an evening holiday from her, seeing that there was a snowy pile of linen on the dresser to be ironed before night. So donning a hat and cloak which hung against the schoolroom wall, Freda recklessly took French leave and fled away in the twilight, mindful to tread lightly till she was screened by the laurel hedge from her aunt's window. She had a twinge of shame at her stolen expedition. She had not done the like since one day long ago, when Mark had told her very decidedly that she had better be kept in for a month than sneak out unbeknown. But Mark was coming, or already come; and all compunction quickly vanished in her excitement, as she scudded

down the High Street, across the quaint old Market Place, and on to the narrow quay. She did not generally choose that way of getting to the beach, but it cut off a few yards and she took it now. Some sailors and fishermen loitering there looked after her as she went by. She had nearly reached the further end, when two or three men came running up the stone steps that led down to the water's edge, and the next minute she was face to face with Mark.

In the gathering dusk he would have passed her without recognition, had not she, quicker-eyed, sprung forward and arrested him with a delighted greeting and a detaining hand upon his arm. He stopped with a great start, and wheeling round caught both her hands in his.

'Freda! who'd have thought of seeing you here!'

'I came to meet you—I mean—I thought ——' She faltered, embarrassed by the presence of his two comrades, sailors both, who were regarding her with inquisitive eyes.

Mark, too, seemed suddenly confused — more than she had ever known him. He hesitated, then said, abruptly and awkwardly—

'Well, it's too cold for standing still. Where are you bound? Will you come on with me to my grandmother's—I'm on my way there now?'

She hardly knew whether to say 'Yes' or 'No,' for his manner chilled her far more than the night air; but he seemed to take consent for granted, and only stopping to point out the lights of the 'Jolly Mariner' to his mates, and to bid them a curt good-night, he led the way towards the beach. They had clearly not expected such a summary dismissal, and there was something very like a grin on both the weather-beaten faces as they gave their parting nod and made off together. Mark strode on rapidly and silently over the strip of shingle which lay between them and the cottage, and they were close upon it before Freda gathered courage to explain—

'I thought you would have been here already. I did not mean to meet you on the quay.'

His face was partly turned away from her, but she was aware of suppressed impatience in his voice as he made answer—

'It can't be helped now,—only folks in Hamelford never know when to hold their tongues.'

She excused herself no more. She could hardly have spoken for the choking in her throat, as she thought what a different meeting she had pictured to herself. And yet, when they were once inside the fire-lighted room, with its red curtains closely drawn, the kettle singing on the hob, and the tea-tray set out upon the table, all ready for the traveller,—when they were once shut in there, the real Mark seemed to come back and she forgot her momentary trouble; and her heart leapt for joy as she saw him standing before his grandmother holding both her withered hands between his own.

He had grown a great deal in the months that he had been away, and had lost something of his boyish manner. There was

more earnestness, more settled purpose in his dark face; but still it was the Mark of olden days who brought a chair for her up to the other side of the fire, and insisted on appropriating his ancient three-legged stool and pouring out the tea himself. He would accept no help. It was the greatest treat, he said, to be keeping house again, after knocking about the world so long. And presently they were listening, with rapt attention, while he told them of his voyage,—of the places he had seen, the storms they had weathered, and the cargoes they had carried.

'And your troubles haven't followed you, Mark?' his grandmother asked, wistfully, when at last he paused.

'If they have, I've been able to bear them. One man—a fellow from beyond Northleigh—made a set at me one day; but I kept my temper, and the captain, who was passing by, up and spoke for me. He said he only wished every man on board were as good a sailor and as honest a man, and that he would not have me pointed at

aboard his ship. Nobody tried it much afterwards. Those that didn't like me kept it to themselves.'

He was silent again. A faint reflection of the old shadow on his face told Freda that, for all his careless words, there had been something to endure.

'But you said you had made some friends?' Mrs. Cameron persisted anxiously. 'Who are they? tell us about them?' It was the question Freda had been longing and yet half afraid to ask.

'Ay, that I have,' and the shadow had quite gone, as Mark went on eagerly,—'Such a kind old man he is, Alexander Ramsay! and he took to me at once. He's skipper of a steamer that goes between Glasgow and the Western Isles.'

'Has he a wife?'

'No; he is a widower. He and his three daughters live just above the harbour.'

'What are their names?' Freda asked, as Mark stopped.

'Grace and Jean—and Elsie,—she is much

younger and prettier than the others; only just my age.'

He spoke rather abruptly, as though his thoughts were otherwise busy. Should she ask him about the good fortune they were to bring him? She had meant to do it, but just then her heart failed her; another time, perhaps, but not now. If his grandmother remembered, she too thought good to hold her peace. She only said—

'And were they sorry to bid you good-bye?'

'Yes; but it is not a long good-bye. I have promised to go back again. Nay, don't look blank, Granny; I'm not going yet awhile —not till you are quite ready to spare me. And now, Freda, I haven't heard a word yet about Aunt Becky or the school. It's your turn to tell me what you've been doing?' And she told him, wondering why it was so hard just then to recollect what had happened in his absence,—so hard, too, to talk to him in the old frank fashion. Presently, glancing at the timepiece in the corner of the room, she started up.

'I must be going; it's past seven, and Aunt Becky will be wondering what has become of me. Oh dear! and you two happy people have a long evening still before you!'

Mrs. Cameron looked at her pityingly.

'Poor child! Yes, it is rather hard; but I suppose you'll fall into disgrace if we keep you longer. Mark, you may walk up with her; but you mustn't stay; I can't spare you this first evening.'

'Yes,—I'll go.' The hesitation in his voice was very slight, but it was more than enough for Freda's quick ear. She struck in at once—

'Indeed you won't! As if I hadn't run backwards and forwards alone for the last five months. Good-bye, Mrs. Cameron. Good-bye, Mark. I shall see you again soon.'

She stooped down and kissed Mrs. Cameron on the brow, held out her hand to Mark, and was off almost before he had time to speak. He made no attempt to follow her; he went back quietly and gravely to his grandmother's side.

'I think you should have gone with her, poor little maid!' remarked Mrs. Cameron, jestingly.

'It's better not. We're no children now, Freda and I, to trot about hand-in-hand as we used to do. People hereabouts are over fond of talking and gossiping, and I've no fancy for giving them a chance.'

'That's rather a new notion of yours; isn't it, Mark?'

'I don't know; perhaps it is. Anyhow, I've thought it over and made up my mind about it.'

'Why, my boy, you look as solemn as a judge.'

'Do I? So I ought. It's high time I left off being a foolish lad. But, grandmother, I want to know about your rheumatism; has it been teasing you lately?'

She looked at him earnestly for a minute, but she asked him no more questions; and speedily she had forgotten Freda, and all else, in the delight of having that honest loving face studying hers again. And, meanwhile,

Freda was running up the hill in the darkness, with her head down and two big tears coursing unregarded down her cheeks.

'It's just as I said! it's just as I said!' she repeated to herself, in panting, passionate whispers; 'but oh, Mark! I didn't really think you would alter in such a little while. I thought there were such pleasant days coming. I have looked so to this evening. I never dreamt it could begin and end so miserably. Oh! what shall I do if you quite give up caring for me? What shall I do?'

That was her despairing cry,—the cry wrung from many of us when we drink our first draught of suffering, and taste its bitterness.

## CHAPTER V.

'Should auld acquaintance be forgot.'

THAT same piteous question rose many times to Freda's lips during the next few months, for it did indeed seem that Mark had left off caring for her. It was not very often that they had a chance of meeting. Her aunt's wrath had blazed high when she discovered that her caged bird had taken flight, and it had time to get to a white heat before the click of the door handle announced the delinquent's late return. Then and there Miss Morton laid an embargo on those evening expeditions, and threatened severe penalties if Freda dared to disobey. She was quite capable of fulfilling

the said threats; and when she saw the girl's downcast face, she believed that she had fairly cowed her.

But she was wholly wrong. There was plenty of resistance left in Freda, if there had been anything to gain by it; but it seemed to her just then that there was nothing to be gained. She could have defied Miss Morton's anger, but she could not defy Mark's indifference! She could not thrust herself in his way undesired. In old times it would never have occurred to her to wait for an invitation to the cottage, or to doubt her welcome there. But now a sort of shyness had come over her—a shyness which a few of his old outspoken words would have scattered to the winds.

Those words for which she was always watching never came. It was not often that he was curt and rough as on that first evening. He tried evidently—far too evidently—to be gentle and considerate when they happened to be thrown together. But he was not the less changed! If her heart bounded at

the first glimpse of his face, its joyful throbbings were all too soon checked by a certain something in his voice, his way, unlike, oh! so unlike his former self; a something so vague that she would have found it hard to explain, even to herself, wherein it lay; and yet as manifest to her as if he had chosen to say—'I liked you once, but I am not at ease or happy with you now.'

At first she struggled against this strange constraint, striving desperately by her own example to win him back to the old footing; and shrinking, above all, with an instinctive dread, from letting him guess how sorely he wounded her. She would meet him with a pleasant greeting, and leave him with a smile that belied the failing heart within. If she had angered or grieved him, she would have gone at once, begged his pardon, and made peace as simply and frankly as when they were little children together. But he was not angry; she felt sure of that. It was only—a very mournful only to her—that he had grown weary of her; that the old bond

between them irked him, and he wanted to loosen it without well knowing how. Then her pride would rise in arms, and she determined to help him, so that their friendship might seem to cool quite naturally. But the next time they met all the pride died out of her, and she caught herself watching his eye, trying as anxiously as ever to beguile him into familiar speech or droll jest.

And sometimes she succeeded. There were gleams of pleasure for her, all the brighter by contrast when Mark did thaw; and at such times she would tell herself that all would come right again some day. He talked no further of returning to the north; but, instead of the old fishing, he made frequent trips to and from Bristol, and always seemed to be very full of business. Mrs. Cameron was kind to her as ever, but she never inquired why she did not come oftener to the cottage, and never pressed her to go there when Mark was likely to be at home.

So the spring months wore by, and the summer came again. It happened one day

that Freda, returning from an errand to a country farm-house, met Mark not far from his own door. She had not seen him for nearly a fortnight, and he turned and walked a little way with her up the road. His grandmother had been ailing for the last few days, but she was better now, and he had left her settled at the open window. Having told Freda so much, he asked where she had been.

'Only as far as Kendall's farm;' and she showed her basket of eggs. 'But it was so bright and pleasant, that I should have liked to have gone on up the lane.'

'Ay, it must be looking its best, now that all the dog-roses are out. I haven't been up there this summer.'

'Nor I either,' she said; and then suddenly glancing up at him, with a kind of entreaty in her face, she added, 'I haven't had one real country walk this year. Won't you come with me, Mark—some day—this afternoon, perhaps, into the woods?' She did not know what sudden impulse prompted her to ask it

of him. She had no thought of doing it a moment before, but she wanted so terribly to break down the wall of ice between them. Before he had given her his answer, she knew what it was going to be.

'I'm afraid I can't. I've a lot of things to look after down yonder. I ought to be going back now.'

He spoke hurriedly, and stopped short. She also. There was a storm already rising within her, but she mastered it completely for the moment, and it would not have been easy to detect even mortification in her tones as she rejoined lightly,—

'And so have I, now I come to think of it. I, too, must make the best of my way home, so good-bye!'

'I deserved it,' she muttered to herself, when he had left her; 'but I'll never deserve it again,—never! never!'

That night she sat up later than usual, stitching brown paper covers upon sundry dog's-eared lesson books. It was sultry July weather; and though the window of the little

parlour was set wide open and her chair was drawn up beside it the close air oppressed her almost beyond endurance. At length her task was done, the last book was added to the pile upon the table, and she stood up, shook the brown shreds out of her apron, straightened her back, and prepared to go wearily off to bed. She was half way up the narrow staircase when the door bell rang out loudly through the still house. She stopped, not a little startled, for no one ever came near them at that hour. The small maid had long since been shut into her garret, and Miss Morton was looking to the fastenings of the kitchen shutter. Freda turned to descend, but before she had taken a step the bell was pulled again as violently as before; and waiting for no third summons, she ran down, undid the heavy chain, and opened the door. Mark stood outside, not looking like himself but bareheaded and very pale, as she saw when the light of the candle she had set down flickered on his face.

'Come!' he said, in a hoarse, breathless

voice. 'I can't wait an instant. She's dying, and she wants you!'

'Who?' asked Freda, in her bewilderment.

'My grandmother. I left her; she bade me, but I can't stay. You must come after me as fast as you can.'

He was gone again before she could answer him, vaulting the low wall and running rapidly down the steep street. Miss Morton had come out into the passage, and stood lost in wonder.

'Who on earth was it?' she asked, when she had recovered from her first amazement.

'Oh, aunt, it was Mark, and he says his grandmother is ill—dying, and I must go. Let me get my shawl!'

'You go! at this time of night! What nonsense! The old lady won't be dead before morning, I'll be bound. It will be soon enough if you go then.'

'I am going now. She wants me, and I must go,—I will go!'

There was a kindling light in the brown eyes, a ring in the clear voice which made

Miss Morton think twice about thwarting her just then; and besides, if Jane Cameron were really dying, it might be as well that Freda should be on the spot; so she stood aside somewhat sullenly to let the girl pass.

'Well, you can go, since you're bent on it, but there's no call to be in such a fever. People don't mostly die all in a minute, as you seem to fancy.'

Freda neither heard nor answered her. She only wrapped her shawl about her head and shoulders, and hurried out straightway, leaving her aunt to secure the door again and betake herself to bed, there to speculate upon that six hundred and odd pounds, lying safe in Bradcombe Bank, some of which might find its way into Freda's hands and hers. For it would be but fair, in her judgment, that Freda should make her some return for all the cost and trouble she had been at, and ten pounds would come in very handily just now, to buy a certain mahogany press on which her heart had long been set.

Very different were Freda's thoughts as

she made her way, fast as her feet would carry her, down to the quay, and along the shingly beach. At another time she would have felt some qualms at being abroad alone so late, but now she was regardless of all save the dear old friend she was about to lose. She hardly remembered Mark himself in the great agitation of her mind; and if she thought of him, it was with a kind of bitterness—for was it not he who had kept her apart of late from the only being who loved her or valued her love? But for him she would have served and tended her up to the end, trying to repay in some poor way those past years of kindness; but now her friend, her only friend, was dying, going beyond the reach of all love or service, and she might not even be in time to see her again alive, and whisper that she had not willingly neglected her.

And now she had reached the cottage door, and halted there to draw breath before she entered. A strange awe came over her—a sudden dread of what she might find within. Her trembling fingers were on the handle,

when it was turned from the inside, and the woman who had lived with Mrs. Cameron of late came quickly out. She started when she saw Freda standing there.

'I was just going to look for you,' she said, hastily, 'but you're too late. It was all over nearly five minutes ago.'

'Over!' It was all Freda could say.

'Ay. She was but barely alive when Mark got back, and just breathed her last breath on his shoulder. He's up there with her now.'

She pointed to the few steps that led to the room above, and Freda mounted them as one stunned. The bedroom door stood open, and the dead figure lay upon the low trestle bed that had once, years before, been little Robert's. Close to the pillow knelt Mark, his head bowed on his right arm, his left hand tenderly clasping the shrivelled fingers that had been wont to fondle his black curls.

The creaking of a board, as Freda crossed the threshold, made him look up. His face

was working painfully, and his lips were compressed, but there were no tears.

'Come and look at her,' he said, without moving.

She came and stood beside him, but she could not speak. It was all so terribly strange and sudden that she could almost have fancied it a dream.

Presently he spoke again quite calmly.

'She knew me, and blessed me; and she sent her love to you. I wish you had been here. It was very peaceful; it would not have shocked you.'

'I came as quickly as I could. If I had only known; but I don't seem able to understand it yet.'

'Nor I,' and he made a feeble attempt to smile; then went on softly—'She was quite comfortable, chatting below with me till suddenly she turned faint. That wasn't an hour ago. I brought her upstairs, and sat by her a little while, and she seemed to be dozing. All at once she opened her eyes, and said very quietly that she was dying,

and wanted to see you again. I must fetch you at once. So I called Mrs. Carter, and ran off for the doctor and for you. I couldn't bear to leave her, but her heart was set on it.'

He stopped, and looked long at the white face already settling into the solemn rigidity of death.

'She hardly suffered at all, I think. She had all her pain before, and it was made easy to her at the last. She looks happy, doesn't she?'

Freda could not answer him for her rising sobs. He had seen death before—she never. He got up slowly from his knees, and took her hand between his own.

'She loved you, you know; she often told me so, and I don't think we ought to be very sorry. She had such a hard life, and she would not have wished to live on.'

'Not for herself, but for you, Mark,' she answered, sadly; all her wrath against him forgotten.

'I don't want,' he broke off abruptly;—and

then, turning hastily to the door, he went down into the room below. Freda lingered a moment behind, but the impulse to comfort him was too strong to be resisted, and she followed. He was alone, leaning both arms on the low broad mantel-shelf, his whole frame shaken with his stifled weeping. She laid her hand gently on his sleeve, but he did not move; and she stood almost terrified at the violent emotion, so unlike anything she had ever seen in him, so unlike his calmness but a few minutes back.

'Mark!' she said at last. There was a quick involuntary start, and he lifted his head and looked round at her almost wildly. 'Dear Mark, if I only knew what to do for you. It breaks my heart to see you.'

'Don't speak to me just now,' he whispered huskily; 'give me a moment. I'm not my own master.'

In less than the moment he had asked for the paroxysm had passed, and they were standing silently, side by side, when the doctor he had summoned tapped at the door.

Mark went upstairs with him, but they came down again together very soon. It was heart disease the doctor told them. He could have done nothing if he had been there; and so, with few more words, he took his leave. Another silence fell on them after he had gone, which Mark was the first to break.

'I had better take you home, hadn't I?' he said gently to Freda.

She assented faintly. She longed inexpressibly to stay with him, but she did not tell him so.

'It was good of you to come,' he said, as they went out into the dimness of the summer night. 'I wish you had been in time.' He spoke in a low, subdued voice, altogether unlike his usual decided tones.

'As if I could have stayed away! If only I could do something! anything! for you, Mark!'

There was a long pause before he answered her.

'It's only for me to learn to live without

her. But she loved me and she helped me. She kept me steady, when——' He stopped, and then went on slowly—'I feel to-night like a little lost child,—I, a big fellow, standing nearly six feet high.'

The unconscious pathos in his tone wrung her very heart, and, with pleading earnestness, she exclaimed—

'Oh, Mark! you are not quite alone! I love you dearly, dearly! You know I do!'

He made her no reply; he did not even look at her. Her heart beat fast; she was strangely frightened at the memory of her own words. The close still air had grown more oppressive than ever, and away towards the moors there might be seen the faint glimmering of summer lightning. They had crossed the deserted market-place and turned into the High Street, when suddenly there came a vivid flash illumining the whole sky. As the blue light shone on Mark's face it seemed to her that it was deadly pale, and that even the set lips were white: then the gleam faded, and the darkness wrapt them

round again. A vague sombre sense of foreboding crept over her. The last time they had walked together up that hill, they had been on the eve of parting. Was the solemn stillness, the ghostly splendour of this night, an omen of another parting close at hand?

They were at home now. Mark was gone; and she was standing in the narrow passage, with his last words echoing in her ears—

'I've not thanked you for all you did for her; but you don't want thanks, I think.'

'And so the old lady is really gone!' Miss Morton said, as she followed her upstairs. 'It's been sudden, sure enough. And it happened before you got there, did it?'

'Yes; but oh, aunt! I can't talk about it now. Let me tell you to-morrow.'

And, unheeding Miss Morton's muttered protest, she went wearily on. But it was not for sleep or even rest that she was yearning: only for the friendly solitude and stillness. What were her thoughts, as she lay watching the faint play of the sheet lightning, now far away in the west? Of

the calm waxen face, that had looked so strange and yet so familiar?—of the many benefits she had owed to the dead woman? It was of these she ought to think. Surely it would be heartless, in these first hours, to remember anything but her.

And yet again and again rose up Mark's face, Mark's words, Mark's sorrow; and, with these, a burning recollection that made all her pulses quiver still. Oh, why had she forced her love and pity on him? Surely it had been all too plain that he had not sought them, even in this his great strait, and that his very kindness was an effort to him. He would have made that effort for anyone. When he was quite a little lad he could never bear to see any living creature hurt or teased. Many a time he had fought to save the poor cripple at the turnpike from the hootings of his schoolfellows; and plenty of captured squirrels and jackdaws owed their lives and liberties to him. For all his fiery temper he had the tenderest heart for any kind of suffering, and he would try hard not to vex her.

And, after all, it was surely no fault of his if he no longer thought of her as he once did. Perhaps she had altered; or perhaps there had been truth in her aunt's comments on her, and he too had come to perceive that she was odd and unlovely now that he contrasted her with others. What was there in her that he should care for her? And then she tried to examine herself with his eyes, and to discover what he saw most amiss in her. But it was of no use. She could only sigh for the old time, when she found favour in his sight. Would it return again, or was it gone for ever? At least, she must be very patient; she must guard her impetuous tongue; she must help him to forget that eager avowal of affection, until some day, perhaps—some happy day—he might not be sorry to remember it. She could not give up hope just yet.

Her mind had wandered away from Mrs. Cameron and was reaching forward into the far future; and though, from time to time, her new grief came back to her sharply, yet her last waking thought was of that old

speech of Mark's—'We'll hold together, through fair weather and foul.'

Four days later they met at his grandmother's grave. But hardly any words were exchanged between them until he overtook her early one morning as she was carrying her basket of provisions home from market. His face looked pale and gloomy as he took the basket from her hand and slackened his pace to hers, and his opening question startled her by its abruptness.

'Do you know that I shan't get a penny of that money in Bradcombe Bank?'

She did not instantly comprehend his meaning,—the money was so little in her mind.

'Why not?' she asked him. 'Surely it was Granny's, and ought to be yours.'

'Ay; but it comes out now that by my grandfather's will it was left to her and her children after her; and if she outlived her children it was to go to his next brother, a half-wit, living right away up in Northumberland.'

'Granny can't have known that!' Freda exclaimed.

'She must have forgotten it. I doubt she never looked at the will after it was read at grandfather's death, when my father was strong and hearty. I know she reckoned on my having it, as I should have done if my father had been alive.'

'Do you care so very much, Mark?'

'Yes, I do care. It would have helped me on a deal; it would have cleared my path, and—I wanted it. It's hard work enough, anyhow, climbing the ladder with all there is against me; but it's harder still when one hasn't a brass farthing to bless one's self with. Never mind! I'll do it! I won't lose heart;' and he strode on so that she could hardly keep up with him.

'She would have been very sorry,' Freda said gently.

'Ay, that she would; but she couldn't have helped it any more than I can. I'm glad she didn't know. It's rather a bitter pill for me, but I must just swallow it, and make as few wry faces as I can.'

Freda was silent. It was a new light

to her that he could be greedy for money.

'Will it make any change in your plans?' she asked at last, hesitatingly.

'In some of my plans it will. I don't see my way clearly yet, but I shall go northward as soon as I can.'

'To Greenock, you mean?' she said quietly.

'Yes; to Greenock. I should have been back there before now, but I couldn't make up my mind to leave Granny again so soon. I shall get rid of the cottage directly, and be off as soon as I get a chance.'

'You have taken a great fancy to those parts,' Freda observed, hiding all sign of the pain excited by his words and tone.

'So I have—and with good reason too. Almost the first real bit of hope I ever had came to me there,—and it may be something more than hope I may get when I go back. I can't tell you about it, Freda. I promised I would not breathe it yet to anyone, but—' he paused; then, as she did not speak, he went on—'I'll tell you what it has done for me

already; it has made a man of me. It has opened my eyes to look on a long way ahead, to stand many hard things, and bear on patiently, though all mayn't be to my liking yet awhile. I've an end always before me now, and I can hold myself in hand and bide my time.'

'What is the end?'

'Do you recollect our talk that summer's evening, a year ago, down by the stream, just before I went away?'

'Yes; I remember it.'

'Then you know partly what I'm bent on doing. I will make a fair name for myself. That is not all, or nearly all, but it's all I've any right to tell you now.'

Her heart sank like lead. It was not only that she was shut out from his confidence; it was not only that he was eager to be gone. These two perceptions would have been bad enough; but in their train they had brought something else not new to her now,—the piercing sting of jealous fear.

Still she managed to force out a quiet answer.

'I'm not very curious, Mark, though I am a girl. You may tell me just as much or as little as you like.'

He looked hard at her.

'May I? Do you mean it? May I say something that's been on the tip of my tongue this long while past?'

'Yes.'

Try as she might, the word would not come quite easily or naturally.

'If I haven't been the same to you lately that I used to be,—and we both know that I haven't,—I've done it for the best. You believe that, don't you?'

'Oh, yes, I believe it.'

The words came mechanically, but her voice was strong and clear again.

He went on earnestly.

'There's been good reason, though I can't tell you——'

Looking up at him just then, she met an intent gaze which seemed to tell her

too plainly that he was troubled about her. Had he guessed her secret,—the secret she would fain have hidden from herself? At least she would put him off the scent—by any means, at any cost. Her eyes, bright and unblenching, looked back into his, while she made answer with a sudden flush of colour.

'No, don't tell me. There's no sort of need; I quite understand.'

He was still regarding her doubtfully, anxiously, as if questioning whether to say more, when an unexpected interruption checked the words trembling on his lips. They had halted for a moment by the clipped yew-tree hedge which skirted one side of the school-house garden. They were too absorbed to heed approaching sounds till a light dog-cart, drawn by a high-mettled mare, wheeled sharply round the corner of the lane, barely giving them time to draw to one side. The driver, a tall broad-shouldered man in brown velveteen and leathern breeches, pulled back his horse on to its haunches; but the spirited beast, resenting the rough usage, started

forward again and reared almost upright. Another instant and the cart would have been overturned, had not Mark, springing to the mare's head, with voice and hand checked and soothed her. It was adroitly and fearlessly done, and scarcely occupied a moment. The next, and the stranger had rendered his ready thanks to the active sailor, cast a keen glance on the dark-eyed girl in the duffle cloak who had retreated close to the yew hedge, and was rolling rapidly along the lane towards Hamelford Market. Freda drew a long breath of relief.

'I thought the horse would have trampled on you,' she said, as Mark came back to her side.

'No fear of that. Who's the young spark, I wonder?' and they both looked after him.

'I've seen him in Hamelford before,' Freda observed, rather absently, 'but I haven't heard his name.'

'He might have had an awkward fall through his hard driving. Are you going in?' for she had turned towards home.

'Yes, don't you hear the clock striking? I'm late already.'

In truth, she was feeling as if at any moment her self-control might utterly give way.

'I shall see you again before you go?' Even then she hated herself for asking it, but yet—but yet—

'Why, yes.'

As she moved away he half put out a hand to stop her, but she did not or would not see it. For a minute he lingered irresolutely, watching her retreating figure. Then with an impatient start and clouded brow he faced about, and turned down towards the shore.

'I wish I had let him tell me,' so ran Freda's tumultuous thoughts. 'I believe he would have done it, and then it would have been over, and I should have been quite sure. It would be better to be sure. I wish I had let him tell me! I will next time.'

## CHAPTER VI.

'A lie which is all a lie may be met and fought with outright;
But a lie which is part a truth is a harder matter to fight.'

'GOING to-day? Why, it's enough to take one's breath away.'

'There's a smack sails from Bristol to Liverpool to-morrow morning, and they are short of hands. It's a fine chance; for once there I'll soon work my way up to Greenock, and if I let it slip I mayn't get another yet awhile.'

'So you're off this evening?'

'Yes; I promised the mate I'd be in Bristol before dawn to-morrow. I only settled it last night.'

It was not much more than a fortnight after Mrs. Cameron's death. Miss Morton

was inside the front garden, rake in hand, and Mark stood on the pebble footpath of the steep street, his elbow resting on the stone coping of the low wall. She did not feel especially cordial to him just then. That matter of the money had fallen out quite otherwise than she expected, and Mark, now that he was penniless, wore a changed aspect in her eyes. Still, for very shame, she did not care to show him this too plainly, and she could do no less than invite him into the house.

'Is Freda there? I must say good-bye to her before I go.'

'Why, no; as it happens, she isn't. It's not once in a twelvemonth that she goes out for a whole day; but little Sally Castle, the forester's child, is lying ill over at Combe, and the mother begged for Freda to go and look after her for a bit.'

'When will she be back?' Mark asked quickly.

'Not till to-morrow morning. It's a good eight miles from here, and they promised to

send her over in the tax-cart betimes. I could ill spare her, but Mrs. Castle made such a favour of it.'

The last part of this speech was lost upon Mark. He was looking up at the church tower.

'Half-past four, and I must be away from here by six at latest. I couldn't do it if I got a cast in a cart both ways,—no, nor even if I could find some one to lend me a nag. Why on earth didn't I come earlier? I never dreamt she'd be away.'

'Well, it's unlucky certainly, but it won't be very long before you're back again, I take it?'

'That depends on what you call long,' Mark returned bluntly.

Miss Morton had thrown out her question as a feeler. She might just as well know something of his plans.

'Maybe you'll settle down in the north?' she suggested.

'Maybe. I can't tell,' he said absently, resting his chin on his hand and looking straight before him. Then suddenly rousing himself—

'I've half a mind to stay after all. But what's the use? It's losing precious time, and I dare-say it would do more harm than good—and, besides, I've passed my word. No! I'll go. You must tell her——'

He stopped abruptly, and then said, gravely,

'I *will* step in for a few minutes, though Freda isn't there. We are old acquaintances, and I haven't too many friends in Hamelford.'

She took him into the little back-parlour—not over willingly at heart, but with a fair show of friendliness. He did not detain her very long from her sweet peas and verbenas. In less than half-an-hour they came out into the garden again, and he held out his hand—

'Good-bye,' he said, warmly. 'You'll wish me success, won't you? And when Freda comes home to-morrow you'll give her my love, and tell her how it was I broke my promise, and didn't wish her good-bye after all.'

'Yes; I'll tell her. I hope you'll do well.'

He went his way with a lightened heart. If he had not fully kept to a certain purpose of his, he believed that he had yet done wisely

and well, and that his grandmother, had she known all, would have told him so. And if it did seem hard and cruel to go without bidding Freda one farewell—yet was it not in truth far better they should escape a parting which would have been sheer pain to them both?

'I'm not sorry he's gone,' so ran Miss Morton's inward cogitations, as later that same afternoon she stood picking the dead roses off the trellis, and throwing them into the basket at her feet. 'He comes of a bad stock; indeed, he said as much himself; and, for all his talk, there's no knowing how things might have gone if he'd been hanging on about the place. He might have changed his mind any day—as men mostly do—and taken to courting her. Anyhow, he's much better out of the way. I wonder whether she has a fancy for *him*. I'll pretty soon find that out.'

When Freda came back the next morning fresh and rosy from her moorland drive, she found her aunt busily engaged in setting out the lesson books. The girl had her hands

full of purple heather and feathery grasses, and her eyes were sparkling with transient pleasure. It was so long since she had been out on the breezy uplands, that, in spite of her heartache, she could not help enjoying the change; and she told how the sunlight was glancing on the sea, and how the Melcombe woods were changing from green to brown and yellow, while she disposed her spoils in a large bowl on the window-sill. But at her first pause her aunt struck in—

'I'm glad you liked your outing, for you missed something by it. Mark was up here yesterday.'

'Was he?'

'Yes. He left a message for you; he was off last night for Bristol, on his way to Greenock.'

The busy fingers in the bowl stopped for a moment, then set to work again—

'What was the message?'

'I was to bid you good-bye for him, and say that he was sorry he should not see you again,—that was all.'

'There's no reason to be sorry. Good-byes are tiresome work, and I saw him a few days ago.'

So said Freda, her hands moving more rapidly than ever among the leaves and blossoms.

'I suppose he told you that he was going back to Greenock?' Miss Morton asked.

'Yes; he talked of it. He likes the place, and there was nothing to keep him in Hamelford now. There! that is a grand nosegay; it brightens up the whole room.'

She rose from her knees, stood for a moment contemplating her handiwork, and then went upstairs to take off her out-door things.

Her aunt looked after her, entirely perplexed.

'She's as cool as a cucumber. I don't believe she cares two straws about him for all the fuss she used to make. Well, girls are just like weather-cocks, and so are boys for the matter of that. She's her mother's own child. Didn't Esther tell me she couldn't bear the sight of Paul Chace, and within a month she was mad to marry him? It's

lucky Freda's taken the other turn. I'm glad I didn't say any more to her; and after all I *did* give his message—almost word for word.'

But there was some lurking uneasiness in Miss Morton's mind; and that same day, as they were finishing their silent dinner, she cautiously ventured a remark,—

'You'll miss Mark a good deal. You and he have always been friends.'

She did not look at Freda as she spoke, or she would have seen the angry flash in the girl's eyes as she made answer—

'We used to be; but I've seen very little of him lately. He's grown surly, and I haven't liked him half so well.'

'Does he know that?' Miss Morton asked carelessly.

'I'm sure I can't say. I haven't told him so, of course.'

'Do you remember, when you were a little thing, telling me once that you loved him better than the whole world?'

'Did I? I daresay! Babies talk great

rubbish sometimes. Ah! there are the children, and I must fetch my work-box.'

'Is she deep?' pondered Miss Morton, when she was left alone. 'Is she trying to throw dust in my eyes, the chit! or does she really care no more than she pretends? I wonder which it is!'

Her wonder might have been set at rest had she seen Freda a few minutes later sitting on her bed, her hands twisted tightly together, her brows contracted, her nether lip drawn in against her teeth.

'Love him!' she was saying to herself; 'she had never loved him—not she! It was only that they had both been lonely, and he had chosen to make much of her for his amusement, and then to throw her away like a broken toy when he had done with her. But she was *not* a toy to be so used! She could pay him back in his own coin; she could take a lesson out of his own book. It did not matter to her whither he went, whether he fared ill or well, whether he lived or died. He had chosen to drop out of her life, and she had only to forget him utterly

—utterly! She was not angry; she was not sorry. Why should she be angry or sorry because one of the Hamelford sailor lads went off to sea? Aunt Becky's eyes might watch her as sharply as they liked. They could find out nothing, for there should be nothing to find out. She had said some foolish things to Mark lately, and she writhed inwardly now as she remembered them. But people didn't hold to all they said. She knew what those questions of Aunt Becky's had meant! She knew what that look of Mark's had meant! But one thing was very certain—they should both find themselves mistaken. Every one should see whether she was pining for him or not.'

Nerved by this passionate resolve she set about her work with feverish energy. Her voice, as she led the children's singing, had never been clearer than now; her ear caught the first titter, and no mistake in copy-book or slate escaped her eye. There was a restless incessant activity about her, which made her even court labour. There was an

instinct which told her that toil was good, that danger lurked in every idle musing moment. She was glad when her limbs ached and her brain was dizzy at eventide, for then she was the more likely to drop at once into the deep dreamless slumber for which she craved. If this failed her she would sit far into the small hours, persistently conning over some book by the help of a dim rushlight, till her eyelids grew heavy and she could see no longer. She read a great deal in those days—read with something like avidity anything old or new upon which she could lay her hands. It helped to keep the thoughts at bay which above all she shunned and dreaded.

She could conjure up no bright imaginations for the future now. The fairy prince, the phantom husband who was to gild her life in some far-distant day, would take no form or colour in her mind: and for the past! each momentary stirring of regret or yearning brought with it fresh humiliation, and must be crushed straightway.

Once in the dead of night she arose on a sudden impulse, struck a light, and went barefooted and noiselessly to the corner cupboard that held her clothes and few possessions. She opened it slowly and cautiously lest her aunt in the room below might be aroused, and took from beneath her Sunday gown a painted wooden box, given her years ago by Mark, to hold pens, paper, and the like. A cheap common box, and yet it had had a beauty of its own in her eyes. She had to hunt again for the key, hidden away behind some jars on an upper shelf. Then she unlocked it. Inside there lay a motley collection, three or four untidy notes, in a round schoolboy hand; some shells that Mark had brought her once from a dangerous cove far off on the north beach; a tattered rag doll that he had hoarded all his stray pence to buy for her; and, carefully wrapped up in silver paper, a curly bit of his black hair that she had herself cut off with his grandmother's scissors before he first went out to sea. There they were—the things, worthless

in themselves, which she had treasured for his sake.

Putting the candle down in the empty grate, she knelt before it, and took them out one by one. The letters first. Holding them above the flame, she watched them blacken, curl up, and crumble into powder, with dry lips and eager eyes. Then came the dilapidated doll, and that cost her a sharper pang. How pleased Mark had looked when he gave it to her; how they had both admired it; how often it had gone with them on their wanderings, and had been put to sleep, well hidden from any passer-by beneath some rock on the beach or furze bush on the downs! She had kept it so long! Once destroyed, no earthly power could give it back to her. Nevertheless, it should go; and its muslin skirts caught and blazed, and presently it too lay a little burnt heap on the iron bars. The shells she could not burn, but her invention soon came to her aid with an expedient. There was a small hole in the flooring of

her room, down which many a button and more than one reel of cotton had found its way, never to return. One by one she dropped them in; yes, even the big pink one which had cost Mark a wetting up to his waist.

Now there was only the box left. That was a longer matter, for it would not take fire readily; and more than once after it had kindled the flame smouldered and went out. But she was not to be baulked of her purpose. Again and again she lighted it, until at last only a handful of feathery wood ashes lay above the tinder that had once been the admired doll. Yes, there was one thing more — the lock of hair. As she looked at it—the dark glossy curl that had grown so close against his forehead —her heart failed her for an instant. She seemed to see him again, leaning back in the big wooden chair at the dear old cottage, looking up at her with merry half-mocking eyes, while she stood before him, weapon in hand, gravely considering where to snip.

Her heart failed her for one instant, and no longer. Before another had slipped by, the scrap of dark hair was hissing in the flame. And now it was done. Now she had only to gather up the burnt ashes in the grate, to scatter them down on the bushy laurels growing underneath her window, and then creep back to bed.

But there was no sleep for her that night. Not that she in anywise repented. Rather, she was possessed by a defiant satisfaction in her accomplished purpose. She had laid the ghost. The past, with its tokens and relics, had all vanished into smoke. There might be far better days in store for her than any she had known hitherto. If Mark were shaping out a life for himself according to his own fancy, so might she, after her different manner, shape out hers; and *doing* was to her impetuous nature so much easier than waiting and suffering. There were many things to strive for in the world — things that might lie within her grasp. She had read how

growing knowledge satisfied some minds: she would try what it could do for her. She would spare no pains to make herself a better scholar, a better teacher; and so fit herself for a more stirring life away from this hateful place. Such were her resolves, prompted by the urgent need of some fresh interest to fill up the terrible blank within.

But this was not all that spurred her on. When, by these efforts, she should have gained new powers, new gifts, then she might be able to look down on Mark, to wonder what she had ever seen in him to admire: while he, if their paths ever crossed again, might wonder on his part that he had tossed her on one side so lightly.

'What has come to the girl?' Miss Morton silently asked herself. 'If she had been dull and mopy I should have known what to think; but, instead of that, she's all agog to be up and doing. She's not breaking her heart after Mark, that's very certain. Ah! well, she may do a deal better

one of these days; for she's growing up prettier than I ever looked to see her.'

Of those desires and impulses working in Freda's mind no one ever heard. She was more resolutely cheerful than of old; but as to her thoughts and feelings her lips were absolutely sealed. She had no real friends or companions in the little town, and she never wished for any. Yet she had her relief, her time of refreshing. There was one hour between the closing of the school and the early tea-time in which, by a tacit compact, she was left to follow her own devices, and could enjoy the solace of loneliness and rapid movement. In that hour she could get some way up the linn or along the beach, and could even climb to the first shoulder of the moor. Each and all of these walks were, indeed, full of memories for her; but she did not therefore shun them. Where, indeed, could she go and escape such memories? Moreover, it was part of her fierce vow to do battle with all those haunting associations; and there was some-

thing in the consciousness of self-mastery so new and strange, that it even raised in her a momentary triumphant surprise. She little guessed how far Mark's influence had gone to form in her a stern determination like his own.

And by degrees the sharp edge of her pain, thus fearlessly handled, came to be so far blunted that she could listen to the stream telling its endless story to the grey rocks and drooping ferns; and she could sit on the shore, watching the waves rolling onward until they broke at her feet, with a composure unshaken by the recollection that Mark had once listened to the stream and watched the waves beside her. The breeze was as fresh as ever, the sun shone as brightly, the birds in the Melcombe woods carolled as gaily. Why should she not enjoy it all as she used to do? She could, and she would.

And when stormy weather kept her perforce at home, she would bend over the school-room fire, now deep in the study of some

dry history, with a map spread out before her; now hammering away at a stiff bit of English prose or verse in a book of extracts routed out of a dark cupboard, but always diligently working her brains; while from her ancient favourites—romances, love ballads, and the like—she turned almost with loathing. Her aunt never interfered with her at these times. Perhaps she thought it needless to press a willing horse, and feared to make the girl restive, when she was beginning to prove valuable; or, perhaps, she tried to quiet certain prickings of conscience by unusual indulgence towards her. Be that as it might, Freda had just now more peace and freedom than she had ever known within those walls; and if day followed day with dreary sameness there, brightened with no word or look of love, that, at least, was nothing new. These things were as they had always been, and must be borne now as they had been hitherto.

## CHAPTER VII.

'He looked . . . and saw
The maiden standing in the dewy light.'

'THE snow has stopped just in time; I thought it would be a heavy fall,' observed Freda, one winter afternoon, looking up from the pleats she was dexterously arranging at a table set before the kitchen window, and speaking partly to herself and partly to the little maid folding clean linen beside her. 'Now I shall be able to get out before dusk.'

She took up her iron again, and wielded it in silence for a few minutes; then, replacing it on the stand, held up a befrilled cap.

'There! you don't often see anything like that. I rather hope Aunt Becky will call in

Dr. Burkett to-morrow when she's got it on; it's a pity it should not be appreciated. And now, Sally, I think you can finish those aprons. We've really managed very well between us; haven't we?'

Sally responded with a broad smile and good-humoured 'Yes, Miss,' and applied herself industriously to the crumpled muslins in front of her; while Freda, discarding her coarse holland pinafore, stepped out into the passage, and wrapped herself in a warm cloak to face the biting January air. She was in haste to be off, yearning for a change after her long day's work indoors. Yet, when she had shut the front door behind her, she stood gazing either way along the snowy street, doubting whither to turn her steps. Down in the glen it would be very beautiful just now; for the soft feathery flakes would be resting lightly on every twig and leaf, forming a delicate lace-work against the dun sky. And yet she was not sure that it would not be better still to climb up on to the moor, and see the

broad expanse of dazzling unbroken white rising and falling until it melted away in the far distance in solemn silent grandeur. She lingered just a moment too long; for, before she had decided, an old-fashioned chaise, drawn by a stout grey pony, which had been slowly descending the hill, drew up at the wicket gate.

'Who can it be?' mentally speculated Freda. 'She surely can't be coming here.'

That point was soon settled. The 'she' in question—an elderly lady clad in widow's weeds—beckoned to a small boy loitering near to hold the pony, and quickly alighting advanced up the garden path towards Freda.

'This is Miss Morton's house, isn't it?' she inquired, in a full pleasant voice, as she approached. 'Shall I find her in?'

'Yes, she is in,' Freda admitted; 'but not downstairs. She is laid up with a bad cold.'

'Dear! I'm sorry. I reckoned on seeing her; for I thought the snow would have kept her at home; but you must be her niece,

surely?' regarding Freda with a kindly smile. 'I daresay I can do my business with you. I should like to get it off my mind before I go home.'

There was nothing for it but to ask her in; and Freda led the way back into the house, smothering a regretful sigh. Nevertheless she felt a certain interest in her visitor, for she was sure that she had never before seen her; and a stranger in Hamelford was an apparition rare enough to excite curiosity even in her incurious mind. This was a portly personage of some fifty years, with a fresh complexion and cheerful face that rather belied her mourning garb.

'I'm as white as a miller,' she observed, as Freda relieved her of the heavy cloak she wore and shook the snowflakes from it. 'I shouldn't have ventured out to-day, if I hadn't promised one of my maids that I'd bring her in to see her sick father. And now,' she proceeded, when she was seated in Miss Morton's arm-chair, 'I'd best begin by telling you who I am; for I see you don't

know. My name's Redgrave, and I'm living at Hawkstone Farm. You must know Hawkstone—it's within a walk of Hamelford.'

Yes, Freda knew it. In olden days she had been across the moor and down into the hollow where Hawkstone lay; and she remembered to have heard that the owner, a churlish miserly old bachelor, had but lately died. She said now that she had been near the farm sometimes.

'The place belonged to my brother-in-law,' explained Mrs. Redgrave, communicatively; 'and he left it to my step-son. But it was lonely for him all by himself, so I brought my little girl away from the north, and came down here to live with him. And it's about her—my little girl—that I was wanting to speak to your aunt. She's my only one now, and but a tender little thing at the best, and she has drooped and pined ever since her twin sister'—the mother's voice faltered a little—'died a year ago. I'm at my wit's end to know what to do with her. I fancied

the change to Hawkstone did her good at first, but she's been failing again lately.'

'Perhaps it may be the cold,' Freda suggested, as Mrs. Redgrave paused, and looked at her; 'it's been such bitter weather lately.'

'I'd thought of that too. You see Hawkstone isn't quite so much sheltered from the north as you are here. But I believe it's loneliness that ails her most. I do what I can to amuse her, but it isn't like having a child of her own age to play with all day long and every day. She misses that, I'm sure. And when I happened to hear the other day of your aunt's school, it came across me that if my little Lottie could be among other children for awhile, she might hold up her head again. And Stephen, that's my step-son, thought so too.'

'But how could she come, in this winter weather, across the moor?' objected Freda.

'Ah! that was the difficulty. If she came at all, she would have to be here altogether till the spring.'

'To live here?'

'Yes, for a little while,—for two or three months, until it gets warm enough for her to ride backwards and forwards on her donkey. Then the moorland air would help to strengthen her up. I don't care about the lessons; she's but just eight years old, and quick enough. I only want her to get merry and hearty.'

'But would she—wouldn't she always be fretting for you?' asked Freda, secretly dismayed at the project.

'If she fretted I could but have her back again. I should often come over to see her, for I shall miss her sorely,'—and the blue eyes filled with tears—'but I want the child to be happy, as I said; and I doubt the little girls here will be better play-fellows for her than Stephen and I. Anyhow, it's worth trying, and it would be only till the spring comes,' she concluded, evidently needing that comfort for herself.

Freda could only say that she would carry the proposal upstairs.

Miss Morton was lying in state in her four-poster, surrounded by the saffron draperies

which to her niece had always appeared superlatively hideous, and looking very woe-begone, with her throat muffled in flannel and a cup of gruel by her side. She brightened, however, on hearing Freda's errand.

'Mrs. Redgrave!' she exclaimed, raising herself on her elbow, in a sudden access of energy. 'Why they must have come in for a mint of money from old Roger! Have the little girl? Of course I will!'

'But she is to live here,' repeated Freda; 'and she is sickly, and will want a great deal of care.'

'Well, and if she does, you may be sure her mother will pay handsomely for it. And besides, money apart, it will be a feather in my cap to have charge of the child. Go you down and tell Mrs. Redgrave I'm ready to receive her as soon as she pleases. And —stay a minute—about the payment. I wonder whether I'd best name a sum, or leave it to her. If I could but go down myself I should soon see how the land lay. I'd have her up here if I weren't

such an object, with my red eyes and croaky voice.'

'I can take a message,' said Freda, reluctantly, 'if you would tell me what to say.'

'That's just what I don't know. I suppose you must ask what she thought of giving—and you might throw in a word as to our never having taken boarders before, that she may see we are going out of our way to oblige her; and——' but here Miss Morton's directions were cut short by a paroxysm of coughing, and Freda departed.

She came up again shortly with such a handsome offer from Mrs. Redgrave that Miss Morton was only too glad to close with it instantly; and the arrangement was speedily concluded, not much to the satisfaction of the go-between, however, who was by no means enamoured of the plan, and moreover doubted considerably, from her own experience, whether that house would do much to raise the sick child's spirits. Mrs. Redgrave was certainly prompt and decided in her action. Two days later saw her and

the green chaise again before the school-house gate, and this time there was a fragile fair-haired child sitting by her side.

'Lottie is only to see if she likes it. She need not stay unless she pleases.'

So said Lottie's mother in coaxing tones, holding the small hand enclosed in her own ample palm, and looking down solicitously into the colourless face as the child leant against her knee. Judging from the half-scared half-fretful expression written there, it seemed probable that Lottie would *not* like it. They had made the round of the house, peeped into the schoolroom where Freda was busy with her scholars, and had now come back to the parlour. Miss Morton sat opposite them, prim and upright, surveying the little girl with her cold eyes.

'She will have the best of care, and I'm sure she wants it,—she looks but delicate.'

'Yes, she is,' said Mrs. Redgrave uneasily, 'and it has made her fractious. I suppose we've humoured her too much. Why, Lottie, my pet, what is it?'

The child's breast heaved with a sob, then another and a stronger one, and without further warning she broke out into a passion of loud crying. Her mother tried to lift her on her lap and comfort her, but she resisted and stood, her hands clenched, beating the ground with her small feet in a manner surprising to behold, and shrieking out amid her cries in shrill treble tones—

'I won't stay. I will go home now—to-day. I will, I will, I will!'

'Lottie, Lottie, hush!' cried poor Mrs. Redgrave, greatly distressed at this sudden outburst. 'Listen to me,' and again she tried to draw the little thing towards her; but heeding neither voice nor touch, Lottie continued to vociferate, without ever stopping to take breath,—'I shall and I will! and I shan't and I won't! I won't—I won't stop here!'

At that critical moment Freda, newly released from her school duties, appeared in the doorway, much astounded at the strange sounds that greeted her ears. In an instant,

in the very midst of her excited dance, the child stopped, her hands dropped to her sides, and she stood open-mouthed, staring at the new-comer, who, to tell the truth, stared equally hard at her. Presently her glance strayed to her mother, to Miss Morton, then back again to Freda.

'What does she do? does *she* live here?' she asked in a curiously changed key, gazing as if spellbound into the girl's sweet brunette face. 'Would she take care of me?'

'Speak to her, Freda,' said Miss Morton, who, albeit much irritated by the child's vagaries, was unwilling to lose her.

Freda came forward, and kneeling down took the hot trembling little hand in her own steady one. It was not snatched away as she expected; on the contrary, the small fingers closed tightly round hers.

'What shall I say?' she asked quietly, partly of the child, partly of her aunt; and the child, without any hesitation, rejoined in an imperative voice that yet had something of a sob in it,—

'Say good morning, little sister!'

Mrs. Redgrave started. 'How strange!' she said to Miss Morton, under her breath; 'she has never heard that since poor little Gerty died; it is what she used to say every day.'

Meanwhile, Freda had obediently repeated—

'Good morning, little sister!'

'What is your name? I want to know,' the child demanded.

'Freda Chace.'

'If I came here, would you take care of me?' she asked, recurring to her former question. 'I would stay if you did, for I like you.'

Freda was not yet ready to return the compliment, though a vague recollection of certain stormy episodes in her own infancy gave her a fellow-feeling for the small termagant.

'I daresay I should,' she made answer, with no great show of alacrity.

'You say "daresay;" are you quite sure?'

'Yes, quite sure if you wish it,' she

assented again, glancing towards her aunt and getting a confirmatory nod.

'What kind of things would you do?'

'Well, let me think,'—half laughing at the child's cautious minuteness. 'Why, I suppose I should dress you, and put you to bed, and take you out of doors.'

'And you *will* do it; your very self?'

'Yes, if you stay here.'

'I mean to stay here.' Then, turning to her mother,—'I'm not going home with you, mother; I'm going to stop with Freda Chace, and let her play with me.'

It was a very sudden transition, and though it smoothed away all difficulties, Mrs. Redgrave was quite conscious of a momentary twinge. She was a wise woman, however, and saw that it was well to strike while the iron was hot.

'That's right, that's a good little lassie; and now mother must be setting off home before it gets dark. Kiss me, my pet; I shall be here again before many days are over.'

She folded the child in her arms, and then moved away hastily, as though afraid lest her resolution should fail at the last moment. But at the door she turned to Freda, who was just behind, with Lottie still clinging to her hand.

'I was going to ask you to be kind to her,' she said, looking wistfully into the girl's brown eyes; 'but I don't think I will. I'm like Lottie; I'm sure I may trust you.'

It was long since Freda had been addressed after that fashion; and with something like remorse for her past murmuring, she promised, simply and earnestly, to do her best.

Before the day was over she had discovered that her new office was not likely to prove a sinecure, for the child followed her about as if she were her shadow. Even when she was settled in her little bed, and Freda had smoothed the pillow and given her a good-night kiss, Lottie caught her by the sleeve and held her fast.

'Stay with me! you must!' she said, in

her imperious way. 'Mother always does. I can't get to sleep if I'm left alone; and besides, I want to tell you something before I go to sleep.'

So Freda, loth to provoke a battle already, and mindful of the mother's faith in her, brought her knitting, and sat down beside the child in the dimly lighted room they were to share together.

'Did you think me very naughty to-day?' Lottie asked abruptly, after she had lain for a minute watching the moving needles.

'Well; yes, I did. What did you think yourself about it?'

'I wasn't all naughty; I was something else too,'—pausing, and evidently waiting to be questioned.

'What else were you?'

'Frightened. I was frightened of your aunt. I thought she looked cross. Is she cross?'

'I never saw her stamp and scream like some people,' returned Freda, evasively.

'I don't mean to do that again,' Lottie

pronounced very decidedly, 'I mean to be as good as gold.'

'That's a pleasant hearing! Don't you think you'd better begin at once, by going to sleep? It's getting very late.'

Lottie meditated for a minute; then, as if considering it a good idea, turned her cheek to the pillow and very soon was slumbering soundly.

'I wonder what I shall do with her,' speculated Freda, lingering to watch the quiet regular breathing and to admire the soft flaxen hair thrown back from the blue-veined brow. 'She's a pretty little creature, though she is a bit of a fury. But if she's never to be off my hands, it will be hard work. Well, I must do the best I can. I'll try to make her happy, poor little mortal, even if it costs me a deal of trouble, as I daresay it will.'

She was right in her prognostications, for Lottie Redgrave proved no light charge. The child had been accustomed to constant care, and really seemed to need it. Her

helplessness astonished Freda, who could not remember the time when she had not managed for herself, and who now found her aid continually claimed since Lottie held her rigidly to the original compact. The little girl by no means adhered as strictly to her own virtuous intentions. She did not, indeed, indulge again in her first demonstrations; but she could be pettish on small provocation, and had a decided predilection for her own way.

'I want it!' she would say, looking up at Freda with a defiant eye, as if that settled the question; and then, if she were thwarted, out would come a full pouting lip, and she would set up the low whimpering that told of frail health as well as temper. But there were other times and seasons when she was as sweet and lovable as a child need be; when she would sit on Freda's knee, with her arm about the girl's neck, prattling of the glories of the farm at home, of the two sleek alderneys and the great cart horses, and the rest of the long catalogue

of live stock, until, tired of the sound of her own voice, she would lay her head back on Freda's shoulder and say softly,—

'Now, it's your turn to tell stories. Tell me about the wicked magician and the beautiful princess.' And Freda told; for let Lottie be ill or well, good or naughty, she grudged no trouble on her behalf.

The attachment between them, though of mushroom growth, had struck root deeply in them both; and the child had not been many days in her keeping, before Freda began to wonder how she should ever get on without the wondering blue eyes watching her about the room, and the piping call that was apt to summon her whenever she had been awhile absent. On mild days she took Lottie out with her, suiting her own pace to the small tripping footsteps, and lifting her carefully over every rock and mossy tree-stump. She taught her to search for shells and sea-weed in the limpid pools along the shore, and showed her the sheltered nooks in the woods and

copses, where the earliest violets would soon be peeping above ground; while indoors she would devote herself to draughts or cat's-cradle, with hardly a sigh for her lost leisure. The spring of love, of late frozen within her, had thawed and was beginning to flow again.

In another way Lottie's coming had brought good to her. There had been moments before then when her aunt's sole companionship had grown almost intolerable, when she had shrunk from her presence, from the very sound of her approaching footstep, with a repugnance she could neither conquer nor explain. But now that she could shift her gaze from the pinched features and cold eyes to the soft fair face of the child, now that Lottie's laugh mingled with Miss Morton's sharp speech, this morbid aversion almost ceased to torment her. And over and above all this there was keen satisfaction in the mother's content and gratitude. Each time that Mrs. Redgrave came over—and at first it was very often—she pronounced exultingly

that Lottie had not looked so well or merry for a year past.

'She's growing almost plump,' she said one day, fondly stroking the cheeks which were indeed gradually acquiring a more childlike roundness. 'I don't know what you've done to her.'

And then Lottie brought her skipping-rope, and showed how she could go the whole length of the garden; and her mother, watching the performance, pronounced again that it was long since she'd been half so bright and brisk.

'You see,' she explained confidentially to Freda, 'I fancy I was over fidgety. I'd got it into my head that she would go off like my other little one, and I was always cossetting her. If it hadn't been for Stephen, I doubt I should never have made up my mind to part with her at all. But he kept me up to it. I mostly do what Stephen bids me,' she added, laughing good-humouredly; 'and certainly he's proved right this time, though I believe she gets much more good

from you than from the little folks he set such store by.'

And this was true. Lottie played with the other children, and learnt her lessons, and worked her sampler when they did; but her seat in school was always close to Freda's side, and she would leave the merriest romp to wander a-field with her, ransacking the thickets and hedges for the earliest promise of spring. On such an expedition they set forth hand-in-hand one bright March day. It was a Saturday half-holiday; and having the afternoon before them, they were bound for Melcombe woods. Once there they found plenty to do. When they were tired of hunting for flowers, and watching the active little squirrels darting from tree to tree, they fell to gathering fir cones and pelting each other with dead leaves, until the long shadows warned Freda that it was high time to turn homewards. They had roamed further than usual, and presently Lottie's feet began to drag, and her tongue to cease its lively chatter.

'Are you tired?' asked Freda, looking down at her, when they had paced along some way in silence.

'Very!' emphatically, and with a half sigh.

'What shall we do? I dare not let you rest. It's getting so chilly that you would be sure to take cold. I wonder whether I could carry you a little way on my back?'

'You? oh no;' looking up at her nevertheless with rather longing eyes: 'I should break it.'

'I don't think you would; it's a good strong one. At any rate we can but try. See here—mount on this tree trunk, and let me get a hold of you—there! Your arm round my neck, so.'

The child did as directed, and Freda, without more ado, hoisted her up.

'I'm very heavy, ain't I?' asked Lottie, apprehensively, when they had gone a few steps.

'Not at all—as light as a feather. I believe I could carry you all the way home. There's

one advantage in your being so tiny, you see, Lottie.'

They were in one of the long wood rides. The leafless trees nearly met above their heads, and the fern and bracken grew thick on either side of the grassy road, worn into deep ruts by the low heavy waggons used in carrying away the felled timber. The wind, rustling softly in the branches, was the only audible sound, save Lottie's voice crooning some nursery rhyme, as she sat comfortably enthroned and thoroughly enjoying her new mode of conveyance. For awhile Freda stepped out bravely, but before very long the child's weight began to tell upon her. 'I'll let her down at the gate yonder,' she thought, —'I'll contrive to get as far as that.' Just then her ear caught, far behind, the faint thud thud of a horse's hoofs on the soft turf. It was not very easy, encumbered as she was, to turn her head; but she did manage to look round and to catch a momentary glimpse of an advancing horseman. She was half-inclined to set down the little girl; but

the impulse to carry out a purpose, always strong in her, won the day, and she only trudged on rather faster than before towards the gate she had chosen as her goal. Lottie's singing had grown very drowsy, and she seemed to be falling asleep. The even tread came nearer—came close—and Freda, turning aside, began to brush through the long grass, leaving the track clear for the steed and his rider.

'That's a heavy load to carry. Won't you make it over to my horse?'

She gave a great start as this speech, in a cheery voice, was uttered almost close to her ear, amid the scrambling of the horse's feet as he was sharply pulled up. Lottie started too, and, lifting the sleepy head that had sunk on Freda's shoulder, called out with joyful amazed eagerness—

'Steenie! Steenie! I did not hear you coming!'

'And I didn't know you till a moment ago. You seemed to be having a very comfortable nap.'

'So I was; but I'm wide awake now,' and, slipping from Freda's relaxing hold, she ran towards the white horse in high glee.

'Take care! not too close!' cried the so-called Steenie, as, swinging himself off his horse, he held her back and stooped to kiss her. 'You were very nearly under Snowdrop's feet.' Then, looking up at Freda with a smile, he continued—'I ought to apologise, for I'm afraid I startled you; but I was tempted to surprise this little maid. We are almost strangers, aren't we, Lottie?'

Freda stood in embarrassed silence, and he added merrily, still to the child—

'You ought to introduce me, Lottie. Miss Chace,' pronouncing the name rather interrogatively, 'can't be expected to guess who "Steenie" is.'

'I believe I do guess, though,' said Freda, recovering herself and involuntarily returning his smile. 'I've often heard your name.'

'And I yours. My mother is never tired of singing your praises: and, indeed, this

little woman,' laying his hand on Lottie's shoulder, 'does you credit.'

'She's not looking her best this afternoon,' Freda returned; 'she is over tired.'

'As you must be with acting bearer to her. I think we might improve upon that arrangement by transferring her to Snowdrop, as I suggested just now. What do you say, Lottie? Shall I put you up? It won't be the first time by many you've had a ride on his broad back?'

The little girl gladly acquiesced, and her brother lifted her into the saddle; then slipping his arm through the bridle, he said, inquiringly, to Freda—

'I suppose you are on your way back to Hamelford? I've business to do at a farm close by the turnpike, so our roads will lie together nearly all the way.'

'Yes,' said Freda, beginning to discover that her arms and back were really aching a good deal, and that it was no small relief to be rid of her living burden. She did not think it necessary to make any further

rejoinder, but as they all moved on together —Lottie by turns questioning and answering questions—she had time for a quiet survey of the redoubtable Steenie, on whose many merits Lottie had been prone to descant. He was certainly agreeable to look upon, as he strode along, well-grown, broad-shouldered, fresh-coloured, and with an easy light-hearted air that sat very pleasantly upon him. Saving the fair hair and the hue of his wide-opened blue eyes, he was wholly unlike his fragile little sister; and yet there was something about his face that struck Freda as oddly familiar to her. She was trying to recall when and where she could have seen him, or anyone like him, when he interrupted her cogitations by addressing her again.

'Do you know, Miss Chace, I believe this is not the first time we've met?'

'Isn't it?' said Freda, startled by this echo of her own undefined impression.

'No. I'm pretty sure—quite sure, indeed, that I nearly ran over you once just out-

side Hamelford, at the turn of the Honiston road.'

'Of course!' she exclaimed, as the recollection she had been searching for flashed on her. 'I could not remember where——'

'Neither could I at first,' he answered, laughingly. 'It has been bothering me for the last five minutes. *I* ought not to have been at fault, though; for I was very near coming to great grief that morning, to say nothing of damaging you. I should assuredly have done one or the other if that young sailor had not been so active. Who was he? Your brother?'

'No,' said Freda, utterly unable to help the hot flush which dyed her cheeks at the unexpected question. 'He was only a friend, a sort of relation.'

'Well, he had his wits about him,' rejoined Stephen, by no means unobservant of her heightened colour. 'I've hardly been into Hamelford since that day,' he continued. 'I was away for sometime afterwards, and then I had the ill luck to hurt my knee out

hunting, and it's only within the last week or two that I have been able to get into the saddle.'

'Lottie told me about that accident,' observed Freda, only anxious to turn the conversation. 'She said the fence you tried at was as high as—I should be afraid to say *how* high she made it out to be.'

'It was nothing to brag of,' he returned lightly. 'I should have got over easily enough if my horse, this same Snowdrop here, hadn't blundered. I mostly ride straight. I hate to see a man craning at a ditch a yard wide, and always on the look-out for a gate. It spoils all the sport.'

'Is it such great sport to put out your knee or perhaps to break your neck?' Freda enquired.

'Is it not? Nothing like it!' he responded gaily. 'I intend at any rate to do my best towards accomplishing one or the other. I shall keep two horses here, and hunt pretty often. I never had time or money enough to enjoy it properly before.'

'Do you like Hawkstone?' she asked, perceiving that he intended her to talk.

'Yes, I do, very fairly well. It's rather out of the world, and I miss my old friends and neighbours; but I shall make myself happy. I've rather a gift that way.'

'I should think you had.'

'Why?' and he looked at her, half amused and half surprised at the blunt reply.

'I hardly know, except——' She stopped, confused as much by his merry scrutinising eyes as by the difficulty of explaining her incautious speech.

'Do tell me? I'm full of curiosity.'

'Oh, there isn't much to tell,' she returned, with a sort of impatience; 'only you *look* content and cheerful, as if nothing ever came to trouble or worry you.'

'Well, and nothing ever does come that I'm aware of,' he returned composedly. 'Your discernment is great. I have it all my own way at Hawkstone. I've the best step-mother living, and the jolliest little sister,' patting Lottie's back. 'I've hardly ever

known a day's illness, or an ache or pain barring my hurt the other day. In fact, I have everything to my liking, and I should find it rather hard to find anything fresh to wish for.'

'That's a very comfortable frame of mind, at any rate,' said Freda, dryly.

'What would you have? Do you think I ought to get up a grievance?' he asked, laughingly.

'Not at all; but I think Mrs. Redgrave will consider it a grievance if you let Lottie tumble off. She looks rather unsteady up there.'

'Oh, she's all right,' said he, readjusting the little girl in her seat; and then resuming the thread of his discourse,—'I believe I was born under a lucky star, things have always fallen out so well for me. When I was a lad at school I tried once for a prize. I wasn't given to working hard, but the fancy took me just then. Well, there was one boy above me in the class who was in for it too. I knew I could beat

all the rest, but that I should have tough work to beat him. I don't think I should have done it either; but just a month before the examination his father had a quarrel with our head-master, and took him away at a day's notice. That was a bit of good fortune for me, wasn't it?'

'For you, yes; not for the other,' said Freda, rather provoked at his triumph over his baffled schoolfellow; 'and you got the prize, I suppose?'

'Yes, I got it; and that's not the only time the fates have favoured me. Just the other day the same kind of thing happened. I was getting hard up—I haven't a gift for making a little money go a very long way—and I was really in great danger of being for once in an *un*comfortable frame of mind,' smilingly quoting her own words, 'when I stepped into Hawkstone, and set myself straight without any trouble at all.'

'Perhaps your luck will desert you some day,' Freda suggested ominously.

'I think not; I've great faith in it. Any

way, I believe in taking things easy and enjoying life while one can. Now, for instance,' and he was about to give her a further illustration of his scheme of existence, when Lottie, who had not found this colloquy particularly entertaining, struck in and claimed his attention.

Freda was not sorry for the break; and espying some violets in the hedge, she dropped behind to gather them, leaving the brother and sister alone together. When she overtook them again they were close to the turnpike, and Snowdrop had his nose over a farm-yard gate.

'There!' said Stephen, taking the child round the waist and tossing her twice or thrice in the air before setting her on the ground. 'Here we part. You must be properly rested now, Miss Lottie; but it's a happy circumstance that I met you, for you would have been the death of Miss Chace in a few minutes.'

'Should I?' asked Lottie rather piteously, taking her friend's hand and looking up at her.

'Of course not,' said Freda decidedly, and quite as much to Stephen as to her. 'We should have got on very well indeed; I'm not so easily killed.'

If he was disappointed at getting no better thanks, he did not show it. He only said as he remounted—

'After that ungrateful speech, there's nothing left for me to do but to wish you both good-bye. You have not far to go now, have you?'

'Only across two fields and down the High Street. We shall be indoors before the sun has set,' Freda returned, looking at it as it hung large and red just above the sea line.

'Good-bye, then. Good-bye, Lottie! Next time we meet, Miss Chace, I'll try and be doleful and discontented for your especial benefit;' and with this parting thrust Stephen trotted down the farm-road, and Freda went soberly home with Lottie.

'So Mr. Redgrave walked back with you, did he?' quoth Miss Morton that evening, as

soon as she and Freda were alone together. 'What is he like?'

'He's like—well, he isn't in the least like Lottie. He is tall, and he is good-looking, and I fancy thinks so too. He seemed to me to have a very good opinion of himself altogether.'

'Did he talk? was he civil?' questioned Miss Morton, with an interest unusual in her.

'Oh yes! he was quite civil, and he talked; but I did not especially like him. He has a sort of off-hand manner, as if he were some great man.'

'And so he is in his way. No one owns so much land on this side of Storleigh as he does, and the old uncle left him a pretty fortune too. Mrs. Steele was telling me about it only yesterday. She says this young man has had the best of education, and is quite the gentleman. Those were her very words—quite the gentleman.'

'I daresay,' agreed Freda coolly. 'He may be all that without being pleasant. He

may be pleasant too. I haven't seen enough of him to judge. Lottie is fond of him; and he has a nice way with her.'

'I'm very glad we took Lottie,' said Miss Morton reflectively.

'And so am I,' echoed Freda; her thoughts recurring, as they often did, to the difference the child had made in her life.

## CHAPTER VIII.

'Will you walk into my parlour? said the spider to the fly;
'Tis the prettiest little parlour that ever you did spy.'

'I WAS told I should certainly be turned out,' said Stephen Redgrave, standing in the open doorway of Miss Morton's sitting-room some three weeks after that encounter in the Melcombe woods. He had been ushered so far by Sally, and now waited with assumed diffidence, contemplating Freda and Lottie both busily engaged in the manufacture of a doll's frock. 'My mother said there wasn't a chance for me. Please to prove that she was wrong, and give me leave to come in.'

He had not observed Miss Morton making

up her weekly accounts at a high desk just behind the door, until that lady pushed back her chair; and Freda, in answer to her look of astonishment, explained,

'It is Mr. Redgrave, Aunt Becky!'

'I'm sure I beg your pardon,' said Stephen, slightly disconcerted. 'That address was meant for Miss Chace, whom I have already the honour of knowing.' Then laughingly advancing,—'If you are not too much shocked at my impertinence, may I repeat my request more respectfully to you?'

'Certainly; we shall be very glad. Pray do,' said Miss Morton, rather incoherently, as she took his offered hand.

She did not quite know what to make of him, but she was disposed to be gratified at this unexpected visit.

'You see,' went on Stephen, when he was fairly established on the sofa, with Lottie between his knees, 'I had to come into Hamelford this afternoon, for I had an errand at the bank; so I thought I would try for admittance here before I rode

home again. Lottie and I have seen nothing of each other lately; have we, little one?'

He could not well have devised a more judicious opening if he had studied it for hours, instead of merely saying just what first came into his head. That allusion to the bank told favourably on Miss Morton.

'I'm sure we are very pleased, very proud,' she said, with an attempt at graciousness, which, in Freda's eyes, sat ill upon her. But Stephen took it in good part, and proceeded amicably.

'We are almost neighbours, you know. You must all come over to Hawkstone some day and pay us a visit. Miss Chace,' —looking across at her,—'mayn't I be presented to that pink young lady?'

Freda had not chosen to lay aside her work, but she now held up the flounced and ringleted doll for admiration.

'Do you wish to know her name?' she asked gravely. 'Lottie, tell your brother what it is.'

'Marie Antoinette Joan Grace Elizabeth,' enunciated the child, with laborious care.

'That *is* a name and a half; and may I ask why she boasts such a lengthy appellation?'

'It did not all come at once. It has grown upon her. We began with Marie Antoinette only,' Freda explained.

'That was the French queen who didn't mind having her head cut off,' put in Lottie.

'We thought that was rather fine of her, didn't we? and that we couldn't do better than name our dolly after her? But then we came across Joan of Arc, and Grace Darling, and Elizabeth in Siberia; and we didn't know how to choose between them, so we called this lady after them all, hoping that she'll inherit all their virtues. Wasn't that a bright idea? and it was Lottie's own too.

The clear eyes were looking, not at him but at the child; and as she concluded, she quietly threaded her needle afresh, and resumed her sewing.

Miss Morton was not comfortable. It seemed to her that Freda was treating Mr.

Redgrave very unceremoniously. Perhaps he thought so too. At any rate he turned rather abruptly to his little sister and bestowed all his attention upon her, until Miss Morton, prompted by an unusual impulse of hospitality, slipped away to brew some tea and despatch Sally to the nearest baker's for a freshly-made cake.

'I suppose,' said Stephen, then steadying Lottie as she stood pirouetting on his knee, and leaning back at the same time to get a better view of Freda,—'I suppose you don't mind living in a gloomy town-house like this. It sounds uncivil to call it so, but still it isn't very cheerful, is it?' leisurely surveying the low narrow room and the yard prospect.

'No, it isn't,' Freda acquiesced; 'I dare-say it seems very dull to you.'

'But does it to you? or are you fond of it? Have you always lived here?'

'Yes, I was born in this house; but as to being fond of it—there's not much use in considering whether I am or not. I don't

suppose, if I had to leave it, that I should quite break my heart.'

'You ought to see our drawing-room at Hawkstone! We get the sun there pretty nearly all day, and the flower garden right under our window is full of all kinds of bright, sweet-scented things; and on the other side, such a view!—the downs, and Ribley Copse, and a long strip of blue sea beyond. I wish you could see it!'

'Simply and solely that it might make me discontented. That is very kind of you!' she rejoined deliberately. Then in a livelier tone—'But, indeed, the gain isn't all on your side. I can't say much for our view, certainly,' looking out at the flagged court and the rusty pump, 'but there's a bit of stonecrop growing on the wall yonder that is worth as much to me, I daresay, as all your gay flowers are to you, just because it's the only scrap of green I can feast my eyes upon here.'

He put Lottie down, and came to the window to inspect.

'Do you see it?' she said, turning partly round. 'There, just at that corner.'

'Yes, I see it; but,' persistently reverting to his former wish, 'I should like you to see Hawkstone. Why shouldn't you bring Lottie over some day, while this bright April weather lasts?'

'What! that you may triumph over me? No, thank you!' returned Freda, between jest and earnest.

'Do you mean that you really won't come?' he asked, in a tone that showed both surprise and pique.

'I mean that, if Hawkstone is only half as charming as you make it out to be, I should most likely after seeing it find this place as ugly and disagreeable as you do; it would be a pity to run the risk.'

'But Lottie would enjoy it, at any rate.'

'Of course if I had to take Lottie that would be a different matter.'

'You would come then?' he asked.

'I suppose so, if my aunt bade me. I'm under her orders.'

She was by no means prepared for the use he immediately made of this admission. Miss Morton at that moment re-entering, he forthwith demanded whether there was any good reason why Miss Chace should not bring Lottie over to Hawkstone some day. Still less, however, did she expect her aunt's ready reply—

'Any reason? No, indeed.'

Miss Morton would have added more, but that Freda struck in hastily—

'That's not a fair way of putting it. Is there any reason why I *should?* Lottie is quite contented. It will only unsettle her, and I don't care to go.'

She spoke with an abruptness of manner uncommon in her, for she was vexed at the trap into which she had unwittingly fallen, and fully resolved, moreover, to show Stephen that she was not to be impressed either by his possessions or his condescension. Her plain speaking, however, served no other purpose than to evoke an angry glance from her aunt; though, having regard to

Stephen's presence, Miss Morton tried to avoid any asperity of tone, as she replied decisively—

'Of course you will go, if Mr. Redgrave is kind enough to wish it, any day he likes to fix.'

Freda might have objected further but for Lottie's innocent interposition. The little girl had been engrossed with the doll, and had only just taken in the new idea.

'Do go—please do!' she entreated. 'I do so want to show you the brindled cow and the old ram,' and she looked up with wide-open eager eyes.

'Very well, dear, you shall,' responded Freda with sudden acquiescence.

Since there was no help for it, she would yield to Lottie—not to her brother.

'So the brindled cow and the old ram have carried the day,' remarked Stephen, with a touch of satire. 'Never mind—my point is gained, and I may depart in peace. Let me see—I shall be terribly busy to morrow, and I should like to do the honours

myself; but Friday—how would that do? Mrs. Redgrave will be expecting you, for I told her I should succeed. Shall we fix it for Friday then? I'll send over the chaise, even if I can't drive in myself.'

Freda vouchsafed no reply, but Miss Morton pronouncing that Friday would suit excellently, it was settled without further discussion, and Stephen took his leave.

'I never saw your equal for perversity,' declared Miss Morton, with extreme acrimony, directly his back was fairly turned. 'I only wonder that Mr. Redgrave didn't take offence, so kind and good-natured as he was about it all. And *you*, too, who were for ever wanting to be gadding about the country not so very long ago!'

'How is the school to go on if I do gad about?'

'Never you mind about the school; I'll see to that. But let me tell you once for all that I won't have any airs and nonsense. I know which side my bread is buttered, if you don't.'

And having relieved her feelings by this vague declaration, Miss Morton departed somewhat precipitately to the kitchen regions. Freda herself, as she put the finishing touches to the doll's pink muslin skirts, wondered a little at her own petulant opposition. A whole holiday was not to be despised—nay, even the drive to and fro across the moor would in itself be a refreshment to her. And then the farm had, in truth, a strong interest in her eyes; for had not Lottie described every nook and corner with minutest detail, until in imagination she saw quite clearly the square matted hall, the pleasant sunny rooms opening from it on all sides, and the great bank of purple rhododendrons and fox-gloves facing the low arched doorway?

Altogether she was in a somewhat more complacent mood by the time Friday came, and she and Lottie were driven in state along the High Street in the freshness of the early morning. Stephen had not come himself to fetch them. And Freda, though glad of his absence, would have liked him

none the better if she had guessed its cause.

'She is a pretty girl,' he had said to himself, as he stood watching the pony harnessed in the stable-yard an hour before. 'But that's all the more reason why I should be careful. I want to show her some civility, for she's been uncommonly good to Lottie, and she must have a very slow life of it down there in Hamelford. And, besides, there's something really taking about her. But she wouldn't be quite the wife for me, even if I meant to put my head into a matrimonial noose, which I don't yet awhile.'

All unaware of these complimentary reflections, Freda was keenly enjoying her rarely tasted liberty. It was entirely pleasant to sit taking in all the spring sights and sounds, with no other interruption than Lottie's gleeful chatter; and it was hard to say which of the two grew the more excited over the milk-white lambs, the pretty black and grey wheatears, and the plaintive 'peewit' of the wheeling plover. But when they left the

uplands, and turned down into a deep sandy lane, Freda began to give abstracted answers to the child's exclamations; and, at last, when Lottie cried out—

'Look! see now, Freda, there it is, through the trees!'

The rejoinder, 'Yes, there it is,' came quite mechanically.

She had seen the grey walls and high slated roof before now. Once she and Mark had brought their dinner and eaten it under the very oak tree they were passing, but they had ventured no nearer to the house; for old Roger Redgrave had been held in great awe by all the boys and girls in the country-side, and there were direful stories afloat of his horse-whip and steel traps. Lower down the lane there was a white gate; and turning in, they drove on along a bye-road skirting two sides of a large grass meadow.

'Here we are! and there's mother waiting by the shrubbery!' and Lottie leapt up from her seat so ecstatically that she nearly toppled

over, while Mrs. Redgrave herself looked hardly less delighted as she stood nodding her welcome. Another minute and Lottie was in her arms, and she was giving Freda the heartiest of greetings.

'I'll take you through the garden, it's the pleasantest way,' she said; and, bidding the boy drive on to the yard, she opened a small gate in the iron fencing and led the way, with Lottie dancing by her side, up a box-edged path winding between lilacs and laburnums and bordered with scented wallflowers, to the ivy-covered house. Truly Stephen's description had not been over-coloured. It would have been hard to fancy anything more home-like and inviting than it looked just now, with the morning sun glittering on all the open casements. And there was Stephen himself advancing from the door.

'I had my doubts of you, Miss Chace. I didn't feel by any means sure that you might not turn tail at the last moment, and flee away home. But we've got you safe now in the spider's web.'

Good Mrs. Redgrave looked a little bit mystified: Stephen had not thought it necessary to tell her of Freda's demurs.

'Come in and see the spider's parlour,' he added, in the same half-bantering tone; 'seeing is believing, you know.'

The adage proved true here; and it would have needed more churlishness than could be found in Freda's nature to restrain her admiration of the bright quaint room into which he conducted her. She stood silently taking it all in: the ceiling, with its dark oak beams, the pretty flowery pattern of the paper, the old-fashioned ornaments and china all so daintily arranged; the pleasant litter of books, and needlework, and writing; the low soft-cushioned window seats; and last, but not least, the view beyond—here of the vivid colours of the flower borders, there of down and wood and sea.

'You like it,' said Stephen, well pleased to hear her draw a long breath of satisfaction. 'It *is* a nice view, isn't it? I don't think there's one to match it anywhere hereabouts.

You see we stand pretty high, though we are well sheltered by the moors.'

'It is perfect!' she exclaimed, forgetting her grudge against him altogether. 'It is better than being up upon the beacon.'

It was on his lips to ask her whether it was better than the pump and water-butt at home, but he refrained. It would be a shame to spoil her content. Presently her eyes turned from the window for another survey of the interior.

'By the bye,' said Stephen, following the direction of her gaze, 'if you care so much for scenery, you ought to care for pictures too. Can you draw?'

'No. I wish I could.'

He crossed the room, and taking a small green portfolio from a side table unfastened the string and brought it to her.

'This is full of watercolour sketches,' he said, allowing her a glimpse and no more. 'You shall look through them, if you like, when you've done justice to the out-door lions.'

'Did you do them?' she asked, with a sudden accession of respect for him.

'Not I; mine are very poor productions. These were done by an artist friend of mine in a walking tour we made together. He died soon afterwards, poor fellow! and left them to me. Ah! here are the mother and Lottie.'

'I hope Stephen is taking care of you,' said Mrs. Redgrave, her round placid face appearing at the open window. 'This child must needs drag me off to see old Ponto in his kennel, and now she wants you to pay a visit to the cocks and hens.'

'To be sure,' assented Stephen. 'Quite right, Lottie! We'll have a royal progress, and teach Miss Chace which are Dorkings and which are Cochin-chinas. Are you equal to the window? It's nothing of a jump.'

Freda laughed, as she silently recalled the queer places she had scaled and the rocks over which she had scrambled with Mark; and then, stepping on the low seat, she sprang lightly down without touching his

offered hand. So they set forth—first to the farmyard and then to the stables and orchard, not even neglecting the big barn. Here Mrs. Redgrave deserted them and went back to her household cares, leaving the three to ascend the square church tower and grope about in the dark dusty little belfry.

'There's old Robin,' cried Lottie, as they came out again into the churchyard. 'Oh, I must catch him,' and she started in hot pursuit of a bent old man who was trotting briskly down the lane beyond.

'Do you know who he is?' Stephen asked Freda.

'Isn't it the shepherd who came with you from the north? He who ran four miles once, in half-an-hour, to fetch a doctor when your father lay ill?'

'Yes;' looking rather entertained. 'Do you know, it seems to me that you are as well acquainted with every person and thing hereabouts as we are ourselves. I have been listening, and you have all the creatures' names

at your fingers' ends even to the blind old jackdaw yonder.'

'I've had capital teaching. In the long winter evenings Lottie did nothing but instruct me; and I was bound to set her a good example by remembering my lessons,' she added, laughing.

'Let us sit down here on this bench, and rest a little after our exertions. Lottie and Robin won't have had their say out yet awhile; they are very old friends. How much good you've done Lottie!'

'Have I?' said Freda, with brightening eyes; for it was music to her ear.

'Have you not? She's like another child. What is your secret?'

'I haven't any secret. If I have done her good, I'm sure she's done as much and more for me. It's been like another world to me since she came!'

Freda spoke impulsively, and he looked at her.

'Was it such a dismal world before?'

'No! only a stupid one. It doesn't always

seem much worth while living when nobody cares much whether you live or not.'

She stopped rather abruptly. She could not tell what had impelled her to speak out so unreservedly; and now she wished her words unsaid. But Stephen did not seem to take any especial heed of them, for he only rejoined kindly—

'I don't know whether you've lent Lottie your roses; but if her cheeks have gained some colour, yours are pale enough. I believe you spend too many hours in that back parlour, and don't have as much fresh air as you ought. I shall have to make you promise to come up here once every week, at least.'

He was prepared for a stout negative, such as had greeted his first invitation, and he was not at all sure that she might not resent his freedom of speech. But something of genuine interest and friendliness in his tone had touched her, perhaps, and she only shook her head, saying brightly—

'Looks are deceitful. I'm quite well and

strong; and if I were not, Aunt Becky could not spare me from the school.'

'Suppose I were to employ threats—to talk of taking Lottie away—how would it be then?'

'Tell me,' said Freda quickly, not directly answering his question, 'is Lottie to be taken away? I've been almost afraid to ask.'

'That depends,' he said, with a twinkle in his blue eye, 'on whether you prove reasonable.' Then—relenting at the sight of her anxious face—'No; I think I can engage for your keeping her at present. The mother knows it is best for her, and she is a sensible person.'

'Thank you!' said Freda gratefully.

She liked him much better just now than she had hitherto done. It was very restful and soothing, sitting there in the shadow of the old church, with the bright sunshine just beyond. That was a red-letter day altogether. It was hard to say which was the pleasanter—the lazy wandering hither

and thither through the long morning, or the afternoon spent indoors beside the open window of the drawing-room. For Stephen brought out the promised sketches; and, while she turned them over, he filled in the vague outlines by description, telling her how merrily the lark had sung above that yellow corn-field, and how below yonder silvery waterfall there had been a deep pool for ever bubbling and seething. Nay, even the old woman in her tattered red cloak drawing water from the roadside spring, had something of a history. And when the drawings were laid aside he turned to books, showing her choice bits of poetry which she had never lighted on before, discerning her tastes and faculties with a curious readiness, — sufficiently rewarded for his pains when her dark hazel eyes met his, sparkling with eager interest. A red-letter day indeed, all too soon over; and Freda could have echoed Lottie's lamentations when the green chaise made its appearance again just before sunset.

'I mustn't drive you back,' Stephen said, as they all came out together to the door. 'I should like it; but you see I've been taking holiday too, and must make up for lost time. However, you'll soon be here again, and we'll finish that canto of *Marmion.*'

He spoke confidently, and she did not gainsay him; for just then it sounded wondrously alluring.

'Steenie!' said Mrs. Redgrave, half jestingly, as they stood together in the porch watching the departing pair,—'it's all very well, but I'm afraid if Freda Chace comes here too often somebody's fingers may be burnt.'

'Whose? mine?' he said good-humouredly, turning about to face her, and thrusting his hands deep down into the pockets of his velveteen shooting-jacket.

'Ay, yours perhaps. There's something about her face likely enough to turn a man's head; but yours is a steadier one than most, and it would take a good deal

to turn it. I was thinking of *her*. She might easily come to fancy that your civil ways mean more than they do, and that would be a pity; for she was a nice good girl, I'm sure.'

'Yes, she's a nice girl, and has sense enough to take care of herself. It would not be very easy, I fancy, to make a fool of her, even if I had any such cruel design, which I certainly haven't. I was only bent on making her enjoy herself against her will, and I think I succeeded. Don't you?' he added, with rather a mischievous look.

'Oh, yes, you succeeded,' Mrs. Redgrave agreed; 'but it's dangerous sport, Steenie, and you know, as I've told you before, you're too apt to amuse yourself in that way. It's all very well to talk of a girl's sense, but it won't make her proof against a good-looking fellow like you, when you choose to be agreeable.'

Stephen laughed, not altogether ill-pleased.

'You're giving me a very bad character, but I really don't think I deserve it. I've

no broken hearts on my conscience at present, and Freda Chace is quite safe, I assure you. And now I must be off to talk to Adams about those cottages, for he's been waiting this half-hour.

## CHAPTER IX.

'Her very frowns are fairer far
Than smiles of other maidens are.'

'YES! it had been very, very pleasant.' So Freda was forced to own to herself, as she and Lottie drove home in the twilight; and yet, long before they came in sight of Hamelford lying dim and dark in the valley, the reaction had set in, and she was angry with herself for having been beguiled into enjoyment. It seemed to her that the influences of the fair home-like scene, the happy home-like ways, the unwonted idleness, had, as it were, intoxicated her for the time being; and she chafed now to think that Stephen should have won so easy a victory over

her. She had no mind to afford him triumph or entertainment, and she had a lurking conviction that he *would* triumph secretly in her surrender. Delightful as Hawkstone was, she would take care not to be found there too often. But the fates were all against her. It soon came to be discovered that she and Lottie could manage easily the three-mile walk; and so, whenever the chaise chanced to be in Hamelford, it was always worth while to send it round by the school-house, in order that they might drive across the moor, spend an hour or two at the farm, and walk back before dusk. And lest this might not prove enough inducement, there would come pencil notes to Lottie about the new brood of chickens or ducklings, or the thrush's nest Stephen had found for her in the shrubbery. Of course Lottie was always importunate to go; and if Freda shook her head and made answer—

'No, Lottie, I'm afraid we can't to-day, there's so much to do at home;'

Aunt Becky would put in her word, and,

by announcing that she meant to take the school work, cut the ground from under her feet. Nevertheless, Freda would have cast about oftener for an excuse, but for a hint dropped by Stephen one afternoon, when he looked in at the school-house on his way home from the market to learn why they had not appeared the day before.

'You must keep your part of the contract, you know,' he said to Freda, 'or you can't expect me to keep mine. The mother was saying but the other evening that she longed to have the child back again. She's been on the look-out for you all this week.'

And this was really no stretch of invention on Stephen's part. Mrs. Redgrave's motherly affection was stronger than her prudence, and perhaps she thought that having once delivered her testimony, she might now leave things to take their course. She did not like to separate Lottie and Freda; but she could see her little daughter far more satisfactorily at home than in the visits she had been used to pay to the school-house, and she

was well content to have them both over there; and often, in her easy-going fashion, left the elder girl to follow her own devices for a time, while she and Lottie fed the poultry or watched the milking of the cows. Certainly Freda, at least, gave her no cause for anxiety. Far from betraying any desire for Stephen's society she was disposed to avoid him, and would often return only monosyllabic answers to his attempts at conversation. And even when he compelled her into listening or talking to him she was not too gracious in her rejoinders to his raillery or his sentiment. About her manner to him, even at its liveliest, there was a hard cold brightness, an absence of all glow or gentleness. But he was not to be foiled. If one key failed he tried another, and at last one day he struck a true chord. He discovered, through Lottie, that she had a natural gift for drawing, and a great eagerness to use it. He had seen one or two rough essays she had made, and when one day he brought her some

easy sketches, and lightly proposed to show her how to copy them, she could not quite resist the tempting offer. Pencils and paper were at hand, and then and there he gave her a first lesson. It was a great step gained, and he made the most of it. Henceforth it grew to be a settled thing that she should practise drawing when she came to Hawkstone. He did not oppress her with too much attention, but he generally contrived to be so far at leisure as to look over her shoulder once or twice at least. Nor did she hide her satisfaction when he praised her rapid progress, though she took care to divest it of all trace of compliment to him.

'I am glad you think I get on,' she said, 'for I may find it very useful to be able to draw if I go out as a governess.'

'And when do you propose entering on that inviting career?' he enquired.

'I don't know. Not while Mrs. Redgrave lets me keep Lottie, at any rate. I suppose, as long as Aunt Becky goes on school-

keeping, I ought to stay with her and make the best of it.'

'You've a curious way of making the best of things.'

'I don't understand you,' she retorted, doggedly.

'Don't you? Then I'll explain. You've admitted that you delight in our moorland air and views, and that you take pleasure, too, in books and drawing. Now all these are to be got here to your heart's content, and yet you invent all manner of frivolous reasons for sitting sewing in that poky room at Hamelford, and teaching gaping babies their A B C.'

She laughed a little at his scornful summary of her pursuits.

'The gaping babies suit me very well. I don't believe in too many holidays; they only unsettle one.'

'That's a sentence worthy of Miss Morton herself.'

'Well, perhaps I borrowed it from her; but it's true all the same.'

Yet Freda, as she bent again over her drawing, reflected silently that she and her aunt seemed to have changed places of late, so eager was Miss Morton to promote these Hawkstone visits, and thereby to curry favour with the Redgraves. Freda could not altogether deny her own inconsistency. She *did* delight in that house, in the sketching and reading, in the manifold amusements she found there. But she fought against the charm. In spite of Mrs. Redgrave's bland good-nature, and Stephen's obstinate friendliness, there was something in the link between them of the patron and the patronised which grated on her sensitive pride.

This it was which in part prompted her to entrench herself behind a cold, almost defiant, bearing towards Stephen. She liked to allude to her humble home occupations, to put in a word, now and again, showing that she recognised the difference between their respective standings, and had no kind of wish to bridge it over. And she did this none the less because

he studiously ignored any such disparity. As time went on, however, she could not always maintain that attitude. Now and then, thrown off her guard, she laid down her arms, and gave herself up to the fascination of the moment.

She never guessed it, but this very waywardness of hers attracted instead of repelling Stephen Redgrave. He had been so used to have everything his own way, and had been generally so well treated by women, plain and pretty, young and old, that it was a new experience to find this dark-eyed damsel, who had spent all her days in the quiet of a coast village, coolly canvassing his views, ridiculing his well-turned compliments, and rejecting his good offices with something like impatience. And then the moments when his efforts were crowned with success, when she was inveigled unawares into gay laughter or enthusiasm, these had about them a spice of keen excitement. He learned, almost unconsciously, to study her words and looks, often affecting

indeed an unconcern equal to her own, but always keeping on the watch for that peculiar gleam of interest and pleasure which would sometimes light her face. He racked his brains to find entertainment for her, all the while saying to himself that, if this were pastime to him, at least it might be very good for her. She was an apt pupil, and it could not but be of service to her to learn whatever he could teach her; and, moreover, was it not common charity to enliven her monotonous existence? Of the burnt fingers as to which his step-mother had warned him there certainly was not sign enough at present to satisfy his vanity, far less to trouble his conscience.

'I believe, if the truth were known, I'm the more smitten of the two,' he said to himself one evening, as he paced slowly up and down the broad garden walk smoking his evening cigar. 'The little thing is wonderfully captivating with her changeable ways; and for her face, it's an insult to call it pretty. No pretty face that ever I saw

could hold a candle to it. Those eyes of hers are beginning to haunt me more than I quite like,—but there's no danger! If I *were* disposed to take the leap, that sour old aunt would be enough to scare me back; and besides, it would almost bring my mother out of her grave if I took to wife a girl whose father was a vagabond horse-dealer, and a thoroughgoing rogue beside if all tales are true.'

And then he fell to recalling how his mother had reckoned on his marrying a lady for the credit of the Suttons, and how to the very last it had stuck in her throat that her own husband, fond as she was of him, was not a born and bred gentleman. He remembered that when they fetched him home from school the day before she died, she had lain holding his hand, as he stood at her bedside, telling him about his grandfather the archdeacon, and his uncle the colonel, and bidding him follow in their steps and never forget that he came of good blood. There was a good deal of

nonsense, no doubt, in that sort of feeling; but probably it was hereditary, for he was conscious that he had some of it himself. He wondered what kind of man he would have been if she had lived. She had been apt to pull the curb rather tight, and they might have quarrelled sometimes, though he was not much given to quarrelling. And then he began to wonder further, whether Freda had a temper, and thought that he should like to see her with her blood well up.

A day or too later, he might have had his wish, if he had chanced to be in the parlour at Hamelford, just after supper-time. Freda had risen from her chair, and was standing with both hands grasping the back of it, confronting her aunt with a flushed agitated face.

'How dare you say it?' she was crying, in vehement anger. 'What right have you to say such things to me?'

'What right, indeed?' retorted Miss Morton, herself considerably roused; 'I wonder who has a right to speak plainly to you if I

haven't. I said, and I say it again, that when you fight shy, as you do, of a well-looking gentleman like Mr. Redgrave, and turn up your nose at his attentions, it looks uncommonly as if you were sweet on some one else; as if—not to mince the matter any longer—you had a hankering, after all, for Mark Cameron.'

She stopped, and looked full at the girl, as if to measure the effect of her words. At the sound of Mark's name thus rudely dragged in the colour forsook Freda's cheeks, leaving them paler even than their wont; and her voice, when she spoke again, was low and trembling with suppressed passion.

'You know that is a lie! You know that I don't care a pin's head about Mark; or if you didn't know it before, you do now. As for Mr. Redgrave, *he* will do me neither good nor harm. He is nothing to me one way or the other.'

She paused, drew a long breath, and then ended in a voice of cold determination,

'Aunt Becky! if you ever say again what

you said just now, I'll go—I don't care how or where, but I'll go *somewhere* out of your reach for evermore.' And vouchsafing not a word further she departed upstairs, and appeared no more that night.

That had been a rash venture—so Miss Morton acknowledged to herself, as she sat plying her knitting-needles; and it wasn't easy to say whether it would do good or harm. Maybe the girl was right after all, and Mr. Redgrave meant only to amuse himself. Well, time would show; and with this oracular conclusion, she decided to dismiss perplexing topics from her mind, and to entertain the more agreeable question of a new black silk gown.

Freda longed for the like power of forgetfulness, but her aunt's thrust had pierced too deeply to be so cured. She had believed that out of sight would be out of mind, that all those old times had been blotted out for ever; and now to-night, after all these many months, they had been revived again in a moment through one

taunting speech. Oh, it was cruel, it was shameful to bring up that old tale against her! What could she do that she had not already done to prove the accusation false? And then a thought struck her, and she grasped greedily at the one expedient which offered, the one evidence she could bring that she was not the love-sick girl her aunt supposed her. Hitherto she had kept Stephen at arm's length, lest haply she might play her humbling part a second time, and find herself favoured or neglected as a man's idle fancy might dictate. She was ready now to run that risk. She would henceforth need no persuasions to draw her over to Hawkstone. She would enter, without constraint or hesitation, into the new pleasures and interests opening before her there; but she would never reckon on them. She would hold them so lightly that she could let them go without a pang when the time should come. She would make it clear to Stephen that her peace was nowise in his power.

So she determined, as she lay wakeful far into the night, framing those laws for her future conduct so easy to make, often so hard to keep. The next time a summons came to Hawkstone she vied with Lottie in her readiness to go, her willingness to linger there, sipping the sweets of that easy happy life. Stephen was quick to mark her altered mood, and to notice how much more readily she accepted his help when puzzled over the French verbs in his dictionary, or when the blues and reds in her paint-brush refused to blend into their proper tints. But he was careful to give his aid in a quiet matter-of-course way, and never to betray such satisfaction as might, perchance, startle her back into reserve. Indeed to him it almost seemed as if he were taming some rare shy animal that, wrongly handled, might break away at any moment. Now and then he would take up a book and read to her while she drew; and then it would perhaps happen that if he made a

show of stopping, her dark eyes would be lifted to his face, seconding the eager entreaty that he would go on yet a little longer; and he would yield, well pleased that she had learnt to make even such small petitions. Lottie sometimes broke in upon these conferences, much to Stephen's discontent. He would have liked to know whether her sudden irruptions were equally unwelcome to Freda; but if so, she made no sign. She was ready as ever to play with the child, or to listen to her, and would never abet him in devising an excuse for her dismissal.

One day—it was a warm June evening, and they were about to start homewards—Freda begged Lottie to wait a minute while she examined a strange beetle she had just found among the rose-bushes. Stephen fetched his magnifying-glass; and as she knelt beside the garden seat admiring the green and golden wings, he was prompted to say—

'I almost fancy you are beginning to consider it a pardonable sin to amuse yourself

here. At least you're not in such desperate haste to get away.'

She suspended her close inspection of the lustrous insect, and looked up at him composedly.

'No; I'm not in any haste to get away. I see now that, as people say, it is best to make hay while the sun shines.'

It was not the sort of answer he had wanted, and it nettled him.

'Does that mean that you think it won't always shine? Do you suppose we are likely to give you the cold shoulder some day? What a good opinion you must have of us!' he observed, ironically.

'How can I tell? I don't know much of your ways. I daresay you would, if I gave you an opportunity.'

'Thank you!' he returned, with a grave bow; 'we shall see.'

'The chances are, though,' proceeded Freda, in the same dry tone, 'that I shall tire first. I'm rather given to freaks and fancies, as perhaps you've found out already; and I can't

ever be sure that I shall be in the same mind two days together. Just now I find it decidedly pleasanter to spend my afternoons up here than in the schoolroom at home.'

She waited for a response, but he was intent on adjusting the point of his pencil-case, and she continued lightly,

'So while I *am* in the mind, I'd best make hay, as I said. Don't you think so?'

'Oh, certainly;' and, deigning no further remark, he picked up a stick and whistled Ponto to fetch it.

For once he was thoroughly offended. He had believed that he was advancing in her good graces; and now his first cautious sounding had elicited this cold-blooded explanation. His chagrin took a form unusual in him. When next she came to Hawkstone he volunteered her no assistance, but betook himself to his business about the farm, and bestowed all his notice upon Lottie. Freda would not allow to herself that she was in the least mortified or concerned, but she certainly was more than

usually conscious of his goings and comings. She had no idea that she had displeased him, for he had always hitherto received her unceremonious speeches with an almost provoking serenity. As she sat at her drawing, and he leant against the window-frame joking with Lottie, she had an unreasonable desire to do or say something to attract his attention; but she resisted it stoutly, and went home without having exchanged with him half-a-dozen sentences. Nevertheless, she was especially impatient for her next visit. She wanted to see whether the cloud had blown over; for ill-humour, as she told herself, was always irritating when there was neither rhyme nor reason for it. This time Stephen was not so impenetrably silent, and even condescended to an occasional smile; but he still kept up a dignified reserve, very unlike his natural geniality. He did not find it altogether easy to support this manner; but, pique apart, he had conceived a notion that Freda would esteem him more if she

did not find him too accessible; and Freda's regard, if only for the sake of his own self-love, he must contrive to win. It was too absurd to have this child treating him as if he were of no account at all. He would have pronounced his plan decidedly successful if he had known how much she missed his guidance and companionship. Again and again she was tempted to appeal to him to clear up some perplexity, or share some discovery; but she was resolute not to betray her need of help or sympathy, unless he proffered them; nay, even then she was by no means sure that she would accept his overtures.

The question, however, settled itself one bright afternoon. She was sitting in the shaded drawing-room, a bunch of wild-flowers and a fat volume on her knee, and Lottie nursing her doll on the foot-stool at her feet. There was hardly any sound to be heard except the humming of the bees outside the wide-open window, and the rustle of the pages of her book

as she turned them over. Stephen was there too, leaning back in the easiest of arm-chairs, with his eyes shut, half asleep apparently, and with a newspaper held in his drooping hand. Mrs. Redgrave was busy in her store-cupboard upstairs. Lottie began to sing a nursery ditty to Miss Marie Antoinette.

'Hush,' said Freda, in a low voice, 'not just now, Lottie dear,' and she glanced up covertly at Stephen's profile.

'Why not?' asked the child in the same undertone; 'does it bother you?'

'Yes, rather. I can't make this out; I shan't be long, though.'

Stephen's head had moved a little, and he was looking at her from beneath his half-closed lids; but she did not see him, for her eyes were again traversing the closely-printed pages, and her brows were drawn together into a frown. Presently she raised herself impatiently in her chair, took up one of the half-withered plants, scrutinised it afresh, and turned back to her book

again with a suppressed sigh. At this new movement Stephen roused up, stretched himself lazily, strolled first to the window, looked out for a minute on the garden, all bathed in sunshine, and then, letting the green blind fall again, came behind Freda's chair, and said in his old pleasant kindly voice,

'What is it? You'd better let me help you.'

'It doesn't matter. I ought to be able to find it out for myself,' she returned petulantly, not yielding up the book.

'You expect to get on too fast. Tell me what you want to find.'

'Only the name of this stupid little pink flower. I knew it the other day, and now I can't recollect it. But never mind; I'd sooner make it out for myself.'

'You're hunting in the wrong part. See here!' and kneeling down beside her, he put her on the right track.

'Thank you! now I can manage,' she said, with some lingering irritation still in her voice.

But he would not be dismissed. He waited patiently and silently till she had lighted on the description and recognised it. Then she looked up at him, mollified but not content.

'It wasn't really that I cared so much for the name; but I hate to be beaten, and after all you did help me. It vexes me to see how badly I get on alone.'

'Then don't try. I'm ready to act tutor, as you know very well; only, after your warning the other day that you would soon tire of us, I thought it more prudent not to obtrude myself;' and he laughed not quite merrily.

'I am afraid I was rude,' she said more humbly than usual: 'I ought not to have been, for you are very kind to me always.'

'Never mind the rudeness. Let bygones be bygones; and now, shall we put this dry book by and do a little Shakespeare together under the walnut-tree yonder?'

## CHAPTER X.

'This world is not for aye, nor 'tis not strange
That even our loves should with our fortunes change.'

'IT'S the heaviest crop they've carried these ten years past; so Martin tells me. Did I not say truly that I was born under a lucky star?' quoth Stephen, coming up in his white shirt-sleeves, armed with a haymaker's rake, to the haycock on which Mrs. Redgrave, Freda, and Lottie sat enthroned together. He addressed himself more especially to Freda, but it was his stepmother who answered him.

'It's a good beginning, Steenie. If everything turns out as well, we shall have you driving your carriage and pair about the country before you are many years older.'

'No, I shall stick to the dog-cart—nothing so convenient; and for you, mother, surely you never would desert the old pony-chaise?'

'Not I,' she rejoined, laughing; 'but somebody else may have a word to say about that one of these days, when you bring your wife home to Hawkstone.'

'My wife, indeed! We don't mean to indulge in any such vanities—do we, Lottie?' said he gaily, turning to the child, and covering her with an armful of the sweet-scented hay which was immediately thrown back at him.

'There, that will do!' interposed Mrs. Redgrave, pulling her little girl down to her side again, and pushing back the ruffled hair from her face. 'It's too hot for such play, Lottie.'

'You might say so indeed,' returned Stephen, 'if you'd been out in the sun yonder for the last two hours. I never felt anything like it. As for you, you are in clover under this big elm—literally,' he added, reaching

out to pick some of the purple blossoms growing close to the hedge, and tossing them one by one into Freda's lap. 'What have you been doing with yourselves while I've been slaving away out there?'

'Just nothing at all,' said Freda, smiling, as she looked up at him, 'except admiring your industry. Mrs. Redgrave had a nap, though she won't admit it, and Lottie and I tried to fight with the plantain-heads; but it was too exhausting, and we gave up.'

'Would it be too exhausting for you to come with me to that copse yonder? I'm sure I've done my duty, and I want to show you the view of Hamelford. There's shade all along this side of the field, and the sun is low now.'

'Yes, I'll come,' she said, rising with alacrity. 'It will wake me up. I was getting drowsy myself.'

So they left Lottie and her mother in possession of the haycock, and went slowly along over the freshly-cut grass to the gate

leading into the little wood. Once within it the path grew steep and winding, and they had to force a passage upward through the overgrown bushes, Stephen leading the way, and stopping now and again to hold back a straggling branch or give a helping hand when the ascent was very difficult. It was hot work, though the leaves overhead screened them well; and Freda was not sorry when they came suddenly on a rough rustic seat, and halted there to rest. The underwood had been cleared for a few feet around it, the grass and moss grew fresh and green beneath their feet, and the ferns had curled their delicate fronds round the twisted woodwork. It was a nook most refreshing to the eye this sultry day; but that which most delighted Freda was an opening made in the trees before them, through which could be seen the sunny fields, the grey gables, and farm-buildings of Hawkstone; and beyond, the moors and the long blue sea-line.

'How lovely, how delicious!' she exclaimed.

'Oh, I'm glad I came; I would not have missed this for anything.'

'No; you ought to have been here before, but you see it's, as the country people say, a gay step from the farm; and, after all, you are seeing it in perfection now. It never looks so well as on one of these blazing days. The cool green here makes such a framework for all that sunshine.'

'Is this wood yours?' Freda asked, after letting her eyes feast themselves for awhile on the fair scene.

'Yes. Old Roger had an eye for the picturesque, and he bought these outlying fields mainly, I fancy, that he might have a bird's-eye view of all his property. Barring the big hay-field down below, this is not very good farming land; but they tell me he used to come up here and spy at the men, as they worked, through his glass.'

'He could scarcely have wanted a glass for the hay-field. How clearly one can see everything!—Mrs. Redgrave, and Lottie in her pink frock, and even the men at the

further corner. Do you see that one close beside the cart, in the scarlet shirt, just having a pull at the stone bottle?'

'No, I can't say that I do,' said Stephen, laughing; 'but, as it is a sight you may observe at almost any minute of the day, I am ready to take it on trust. And now look about for Hamelford.'

She soon found it, the cluster of dingy brown-red roofs nestling in the gully between the two hills.

'It looks better from this distance than it does when you are in it,' she observed. 'But Hawkstone looks well everywhere—inside and out. Really I think one might almost guess how bright and cozy the rooms are, even from the glimpses we can get here of the stone walls and chimney-stacks. How the sun must be streaming in through that west window just now!'

'Yes,' said Stephen, his eyes following hers; 'it is a dear old place. I would not change it for the grandest house in the county.'

He spoke with unwonted earnestness, and then began to hum softly to himself as he had a way of doing when he happened to be thinking.

Freda did not disturb his meditations. She was perfectly content to sit there as long as he pleased, enjoying the shadowy stillness of the wood and all the summer beauty of the landscape beyond. She was glad to know that he enjoyed it too—that he comprehended the vague pleasure which, keen as it was, she could hardly have described. He was very quick in reading her emotions, and she no longer resented his close observation. Since that passage over the botany book they had been capital friends; and though Stephen's hands had been full of late, and she had seen less of him than usual, they had grown in intimacy. She talked to him freely, took all his banter with good-humour, and often returned it in kind. Now and then, when she was alone, a fear would suddenly strike her lest she should be slipping unawares

into the very danger she had so fully purposed to avoid—lest she should be learning to depend too much on him and on his kindness. But she put it aside, for she was sure that her eyes were open, and that she saw him truly. He liked her—took an interest in her; just that, and no more. He had never given a hint of love, he had never even sworn eternal friendship. And she was glad that he had not, for she might have been foolish enough to believe him. She was not thinking of all this now, however. She was simply revelling in the glory of the western sky as it melted from azure into a faint tender green, and watching the changing rose-tints of the light clouds above. She had not observed that Stephen's low humming had ceased, when he spoke to her abruptly.

'Freda'—he always called her so now—'do you remember my once telling you that I had everything to my mind? I dare say you don't—it's a long while ago.'

'Ah, but I do,' she returned frankly. 'It

was in the Melcombe woods, the first—no, not the first—the second time I ever saw you.'

'I could not say as much as that now. There is something that I have not got that I wish for very much indeed, and can't well do without.'

'That comes of being so fortunate,' she said, lightly. 'The more you have, the more you want. What *is* this important something that you can't do without?'

'You, Freda! I want to have you for my wife.'

There was a dead silence. She had been looking at him only a minute before, but she had turned her face aside now so that he could not easily see it. He waited for her to speak till he could wait no longer.

'Say something, Freda; give me some answer,' he urged, with more of entreaty in his tone than there had been at first.

She looked round and met his eyes, her own full of startled wistful questioning.

'Do you really mean it? Are you sure that you are in earnest?'

'Yes, indeed. How can you ask me? Do I look as if I were joking? Surely you must have guessed it before this?'

'Indeed, I have not,' she answered in a low tone.

'At least you know it now. I love you, Freda; I want to marry you. Will you have me?'

Once again she gave him no answer. Once again her face was averted, so that he could not read its expression.

His heart began to beat faster than it had ever beaten in his life before. Was she going to throw him over after all? He got up from his seat, and kneeling down in front of her, took her unresisting hand in both of his, and looked full into her eyes.

'Freda, I am waiting: speak to me,—can't you care for me at all?' he asked, pleadingly, and with a tremulous anxiety in his voice.

'Yes,' she said, earnestly meeting his gaze;

'I care for you very much. I will marry you, if you are sure you wish it.'

'And you love me?' he asked again, as if her words were hardly strong enough to satisfy him.

'I would not marry you unless I did.'

'But you were a long while making up your mind about it,' he persisted. 'I was getting quite afraid that you would say "No" when you did speak.'

'A long while!' she exclaimed. 'Two minutes, at the most, to say whether I would give myself to you, for better, for worse, till death us do part;' and she repeated the words as though they had already been sounding in her ears. 'I don't think two minutes was very long for that.'

'But it could not have taken you quite by surprise,' he said, as he took his seat again beside her, not releasing the hand he held. 'You must have seen lately that I was over head and ears in love with you.'

'No; I did not see it. Sometimes, just for a moment'—and she raised her candid

honest eyes to his—'I did fancy it; but then I knew the difference there was between us in money and knowledge and station, and I felt sure you could not mean that.'

'And what did you suppose I meant?'

'I thought you liked me, and liked to talk to me and teach me, though I could not quite understand why you should. I thought you were glad to have me as a companion, and did not much consider whether it was good for me or not.'

It was so nearly what had been the truth until a very short time back, that it was fortunate for Stephen that his sunburnt cheeks hid his rising colour.

'And so,' Freda proceeded, 'I knew that I must take care of myself; and that was why I held back even when I began to like you.'

'So you did like me a little? You have come round so much lately that I thought there must be just a grain of love for me in some corner of your heart, or I don't

know when I should have plucked up courage to pop the question.'

'No!' she said emphatically. 'I did *not* love you. I liked you—I admired you—a little—a good deal, perhaps; but I would never have *loved* you in the way you mean while I believed you did not really care for me. I think,' and her eyes sparkled and her voice grew clearer, 'that it is a contemptible thing—a degrading thing—for a girl to give her love where it is not wanted.'

'But you see it is wanted here,' he said, laughing at her energy, and putting his arm about her to draw her closer to him; 'and you have some ready for me now, haven't you?'

'Yes! oh, yes—how could I help it? I never thought that I could be so happy—that anything so good could come to me.'

'I think there must have been a bit—a very wee bit of love before,' Stephen said, in something of his old tone; 'though you won't own to it.'

'If there was I did not know it. But it doesn't much matter now, does it? You can't imagine,' she added, after a pause, and speaking in a quick excited way, 'how strange and wonderful it is to me to know that you do care for me—always will care for me, as long as I live. I have had so little love—it is like a new sense.'

It was scarcely less strange to him to have this girl, once so unapproachable, yielding to his embrace, looking up at him with that bright eager light in her beautiful eyes.

'We must go back to the mother,' he said presently. 'I can't keep my good fortune to myself any longer; I want to proclaim it far and wide. There's an old man with a bundle of sticks, making his way through the wood yonder: don't you think he would wish to be introduced to my future wife?'

Freda laughed responsively. If she was not quite prepared for such general publicity, she had no desire to hide her light under

a bushel. Her heart was bounding with the new pride and delight of being chosen and beloved.

'Freda has not yet objected to the green chaise, mother,' said Stephen, gravely, as he dropped again into the nest of hay, and made room for her beside him; 'so I think she'll do; don't you?'

Mrs. Redgrave looked at him for a moment, rather at sea—then at Freda, and grasped the situation.

'I've been half expecting it,' said she heartily, 'this month back. Well, Steenie, you might have done worse;' and she held out her hand cordially.

'He might have done much better,' said Freda, laughing and blushing.

'You see he doesn't think so, and he ought to be the best judge. Well, this is a fine end to our haymaking. Lottie child, kiss your brother and wish him joy.'

Lottie did as she was bid, and then asked, not unnaturally—

'What for?'

'Because I'm going to have the prettiest and nicest little wife in all England,' said Stephen, patting her cheek.

'Why, you said wives were vanities just now,' protested Lottie, rather scandalised at such inconsistency.

'So I did, but there are exceptions to every rule, and this is an exception,' laying his hand on Freda's arm. 'Don't you think she will make rather a nice sister?'

'Is it Freda?' asked the child eagerly.

'Yes, it's Freda. What do you say to that?'

Lottie's answer was to precipitate herself on Freda's lap, and hug her tightly round the neck.

'And we shall both live at Hawkstone!' she exclaimed gleefully, looking at it from her own point of view.

'To be sure. See what advantages the arrangement opens up. But, mother, do you know what time it is? We ought to be on our way home; and I rather think the

waggon has been waiting for the last half-hour.'

As they walked towards it Stephen let Lottie take possession of Freda's hand, and himself fell a little behind with Mrs. Redgrave.

'And so you won't forbid the banns?' he asked her gaily.

'Not I; you are your own master, and have a full right to please yourself, and you can well afford to do it. I'm always glad to see people marry for love, and I like Freda. As for her being a teacher, why it's not for me certainly to turn up my nose at her on that score since I am but a farmer's daughter myself. No, Steenie! I thought I was bound to warn you, but I never at all expected you'd heed my warning if she happened to hit your fancy. As I told you at the time, I thought more of her than of you. But all's well that ends well, and I hope you'll spend many happy years together.'

'We mean to try! I made some rash

assertions, if I remember right, on that occasion, but you showed more foresight. She *is* enough to turn any man's head.'

'Are you tired?' Stephen asked Freda, when they had been for some time threading their way through the green lanes towards the farm.

At his question her face broke into a smile. 'Tired! no.'

She made answer in a bright alert voice, that seemed to say there was a new life in her defying weariness.

'Then shall we get out and walk? It is hardly a mile, and it is quite cool now. If we take the short way across the fields we shall be at home as soon as the waggon party.'

She agreed, nothing loth, and he stopped the waggon and helped her out.

'It is a relief to escape all that jolting and jingling,' he said, when they had crossed the stile and he had drawn her hand through his arm with an air of fond possession. 'See, the moon is rising already. It is a

perfect evening, and we hardly seem to have begun our talk yet. There are a hundred things I want to say and hear.'

'Then you shall begin, and my turn will come presently.'

'Well, firstly, I'm curious to know when you began to like me. You didn't think much of me that day when I overtook you in the Melcombe woods.'

'I did. I thought you were a very "proper man,"' looking up with shy pride at his tall well-knit figure and fresh comely face.

'That's nothing,' said he, pretending to shake his head, but by no means insensible to the sweet flattery. 'Never mind my looks. What did you think of me?'

'Shall I tell you honestly?'

'To be sure. I'm all anxiety to know.'

'I thought you had a very good opinion of yourself.'

'I'm afraid I have,' he agreed, laughing good-humouredly. 'You'll have to snub me, in order to bring me to a better frame

of mind. Well, and what else did you think?'

'That you were good-natured and polite, but rather provoking. That's really all I made out the first day.'

'And the next, and the next?'

'Oh, I found that you were pleasant and merry, and that you knew a great deal more about everything than anyone I'd ever come across, and that you were thoughtful in all manner of ways. You took a great deal of trouble for me, even when I was most disagreeable.'

'Did I? and shall I tell you why? Shall I make my confession now? I never thought you disagreeable. When I met you that day in the wood I said to myself that you had the most winning face I had ever seen; not handsome, you know, or exactly pretty perhaps, but altogether enchanting. I thought I should like to know more of you; and when I got to know you well I found that your face was not the best part of you. I wonder if you have any notion how bewitching you are, Freda?'

'How should I have?' she asked with just a tinge of bitterness. 'No one ever found me so; hardly anyone ever cared for me in the least.'

They walked on until they reached the gate leading into the home paddock. Beyond lay the garden and the house in the soft evening light, the crescent moon rising slowly above the moorland.

Stephen halted there, and, leaning his elbow on the upper rail, slipped his other arm round Freda, holding her so that she could not turn away from him.

'I want you to tell me something,' he said, looking down at her. 'You said just now that there was *hardly* anyone who cared for you. That means there was someone. I think I can guess who the someone may have been.'

'Who?' she asked, not flinching in the least from his close gaze.

'That same young sailor who caught my horse so cleverly last autumn.'

'No,' she replied with a certain irony, 'it

was not him I meant; it was his grandmother.'

Stephen could not help laughing at the bathos, and she laughed with him.

'Still,' he continued persistently, 'are you sure that you did not care for that sailor, or he for you? He was a handsome fellow, and I remember some tell-tale blushes when I asked you who he was. I'm not a very jealous man; but I should like to hear something more about him.'

'I will tell you,' said Freda, speaking very steadily, though with a visible effort. 'You have a right to know; and I am glad you have asked me because I might have found it hard to begin. There is not much to tell. His name is Mark Cameron. We played together when we were children. When he first went to sea I missed him very much; but he came back after a little while—only a few months—quite altered. He went away again just after you saw us, and he didn't even bid me good-bye. There, that is the story; not a very exciting one, is it?'

'And did you break your heart after him?' Stephen asked, not greatly dismayed at this revelation.

She laughed.

'Not that I'm aware of. Are you afraid that you've got hold of a damaged article? Indeed, you may be easy as to that. I *did* care for him, but I had learnt to do very well without him long before I came across you. I think I should have killed myself if I had found that I was such a pitiful idiot as to pine for him.'

She had spoken rapidly, in short abrupt sentences.

'And what has become of him?'

'I can't tell. I've never heard a syllable about him since he left Hamelford.'

'I wonder whether he is ever likely to turn up again?' Stephen speculated. 'If he does, he mustn't expect me to give you up to him.'

She shrunk almost as if he had hurt her.

'He would not be in the least likely to thank you for the gift. I'm yours now,

yours altogether; and—Stephen'—the new name coming doubtfully and timidly from her lips, 'mayn't we put him out of sight? He does not belong to these new happy days that are coming to you and me. He belongs to a dreary time that is past and gone, dead and buried long ago.'

When she looked at him so anxiously, when she spoke to him so pleadingly, he would have found it hard to resist any appeal she might have made; and besides, as he had truly said, he was not a jealous man, and had small fear that the sailor would prove a dangerous rival.

He stooped down and softly kissed her.

'We'll dismiss him then,' he agreed, 'from this time forth for evermore. And now having made our several shrifts, let us in to supper. I see lights already in the dining-room, and I'm inclined to think that happiness makes one hungry.'

'I don't think I've heard your shrift,' suggested Freda, as he unlatched the gate to let her through.

'What! not that I was weak enough to fall in love with you at first sight. What more would you have? The rest must bide for another time; but I don't remember just now anything half so heinous as that.'

Stephen's heart was very light that evening. Over and over again, when he heard Freda's blithe laugh and when his eyes met hers, he said to himself that he had done a good day's work; that he had drawn a prize in the lottery.

## CHAPTER XI.

**'Dumb with amaze she stood, as a storm-stunned nestling
Fallen from bough or from eave lies dumb.'**

'AND so you won't let me come all the way home with you?' asked Stephen discontentedly the next morning.

He and Freda were standing together on the crest of the hill just above Hamelford, Lottie having been left behind at Hawkstone.

'No, indeed, I won't. Aunt Becky might offer to embrace you if her feelings were very overpowering; you had much better give her time to cool down first.'

'You seem to expect that she will receive the intelligence with favour,' observed Stephen.

'I should be sorry to say that. It all de-

pends upon her mood. She will think it a good match, no doubt,' looking at him merrily; 'but then, on the other hand, she will lose my valuable services. However, if she is vexed it won't be for the first time; and as to hindering me, it's too late for that now, isn't it?' and with a triumphant smile she left him.

Yes! there was triumph mingling with her deeper gladness; and, walking down the High Street in the bright morning light, she was conscious that she should have a vivid satisfaction in making her announcement to Miss Morton, let her take it as she might. She did not take it in either of the two ways Freda had expected. She showed no dismay at the prospect of her single-handed toils; but neither did she display any of the elation which Freda had thought the good match might produce.

'I am going to marry Mr. Redgrave.' So the girl had told her, with scarcely any preface, and for a moment she had answered absolutely nothing. When she did speak,

her first impulse, oddly enough, seemed to be to justify herself—to wash her hands, as she herself phrased it, of the whole affair.

'Going to marry Mr. Redgrave,' she repeated slowly. 'Very well; you will do as you like. You have settled it for yourself, and it is not for me to interfere.'

Then she rose from her chair, walked to the dresser, for they were in the kitchen, and began shelling beans with her back towards Freda.

'I suppose you are rather surprised?' Freda asked, carelessly.

'Of course I am surprised. People will say,' she continued in a sharp high voice, 'that I expected it all along, and that I've wanted to bring it about because he is well-to-do. But that's a likely story, isn't it? If he is well off I don't suppose much of his money will find its way into my pocket; and it can't be for my interest to be left to shift for myself just when I'm getting on in years.'

'I'm sure I don't know why people

should say any such things,' returned Freda, impatiently.

'They will, though. The world's always ready enough to be spiteful. It served my turn, and yours too, to be on good terms with the Redgraves; but how should I know that he'd be falling in love with you, or that you'd have him? Well, as I said before, it's your concern not mine. I wash my hands of it altogether. Only remember,' and she turned round with a sort of vehemence, '*I* never urged your marrying Stephen Redgrave, nor heard so much as a hint of it before. It's your own doing, your own choice.'

'Of course it is my own choice,' said Freda coldly, the old antagonistic feeling rising up strongly within her. 'I don't think you need be at all afraid that I shall ever cast it up against you.'

'And, pray, when is it to be?' asked Miss Morton abruptly, 'for I suppose you've settled it all.'

'No, we have settled nothing. He only spoke to me yesterday.'

'It had better be soon—the sooner the better. I can't have him philandering about here, and your head will be too full of wedding clothes and wedding trips for much teaching, I'll warrant.'

'Yes, it had better be soon,' assented Freda.

And it was not her lips alone that echoed her aunt's words. A great yearning was upon her to exchange this dreary home of hers, home only in name, for the sunshine of Hawkstone life.

Miss Morton vouchsafed no further comment upon Freda's tidings, and it seemed to be tacitly agreed between them that the subject should be dropped; but she was ready with her stiff old-fashioned congratulations when Stephen appeared next morning to claim his betrothed at once for a week's visit at the farm. Audacious as the request sounded she made no demur, and Freda had a secret conviction that she was glad to be rid of her at once. She said so to Stephen, as they sat together that same

evening in the Hawkstone garden watching the golden sunset.

'I wonder why she hates me so. I really believe she can't bear the sight of me.'

'All the more reason that you should not inflict yourself upon her,' he remarked. 'Now I, on the other hand, feel quite equal to enduring your society. Hence it naturally follows that we had better immediately name the day.'

She did not protest, or affect a coyness which she could not feel. She only said simply,

'It can be whenever you please, Steenie.'

'Suppose I say to-morrow!'

'That would be so very unreasonable that I should be afraid to marry you at all.'

'Mother,' called Stephen to Mrs. Redgrave, who was just then crossing the lawn attended by Lottie and a large tabby cat, 'we want you here.'

Then, as she came up to them,

'Help us to decide a weighty point. How soon can we tie the marriage-knot?'

Mrs. Redgrave laughed.

'Well, you are certainly losing no time. However, I always was against long engagements; and there isn't any good reason for waiting, as far as I know. Let me see! We are in the beginning of July now. Why shouldn't your wedding come off in September, as soon as the harvest is over?'

'Too long to wait,' pronounced Stephen.

But he was reminded that there were various garments to be bought, and preparations to be made; and, moreover, that he could not take a long holiday in the harvest season of the year. So it was finally decided that in September it should be.

'We must contrive divers ways of consuming the intermediate time,' Stephen said when he and Freda were left alone again, 'or my patience won't hold out. My business will have to take care of itself, as you know it can do on occasion, and you must spend your days up here:—or stay, I suppose, according to custom, the visits ought to be on my side now, oughtn't they?'

'I don't know,' returned Freda smiling, 'but Aunt Becky especially mentioned that she objected to any philanderings.'

'Did she? How inhuman of her! However, I don't think it would be easy even for me to philander in that little back-parlour and that august presence; so I vote that we set at nought custom, and that you come up here. Do you mean to keep up all your new accomplishments, now that you are not going to be a governess?'

'Indeed I do. You know I love drawing, and besides I shall want them more than ever. It vexes me to think what an ignorant wife you will have, you who have so much learning.'

'You foolish child! My learning, as you call it, is scanty enough. I made the most of it to dazzle you; but it's not very obtrusive generally. You've twice the cleverness and perseverance that I have. I was always too idle,' he continued, leaning back and looking up at her, the picture of lazy content. 'I've dabbled in a good many

things, but I've never gone deep. My mother had a fancy that I should go to college, and take to the law. I should have liked Cambridge well enough, but I could not face the legal drudgery; so, when I came back from Bonn, I just settled down to farming like my forefathers.'

'Was she much disappointed?' Freda asked.

'She was dead then; and though my father grumbled a little at the money he had thrown away on my French and German, I think he was glad at heart that I should follow the old trade. He knew that I should find a comfortable berth here one day, though he hadn't much to leave me himself.'

'I suppose you are a rich man, Steenie?'

'Not as some people count riches. I've made no great investments, and I haven't got £10,000 hidden away in a stocking or a tea-pot; but I've more than enough for any reasonable wants, and I needn't think twice about spending a sixpence. Does that content you, Freda? While I live I hope

you'll always "walk in silk attire, and siller hae to spare;" and if I died, this old house and the land would not be such a bad provision for my widow till she found another spouse.'

'I'm not prepared to look on quite so far ahead till you begin to ill-treat me,' said Freda, smiling and putting her hand in his.

He clasped it fondly.

'You little woman! I can hardly believe you are the person who used to cut short all my pretty speeches so scornfully. I think you must be a changeling.'

'I think so too,' she returned dreamily; 'I feel like it. Do you remember that poem you once read me? "The Lotos-Eaters" it was called.'

'Yes! What of it?'

'I don't know; only it comes back to me this evening. I am very happy, Steenie.'

'And I too,' he said tenderly; and so he was. Happier than he had ever been before; happier a good deal than he had looked to be. He had known some qualms before-

hand as to how he might feel when the die was fairly cast; sundry misgivings that he was a fool, and that the world would dub him so. But all these had given way before the strong attraction this girl had for him; and since he had won her they had altogether taken flight. He had scarcely any near kindred, and there was no one about him to oppose his choice or to impugn its wisdom; while each passing hour added its quota to his own inward conviction that he had been very wise. For was she not altogether lovable, with her clear eyes and delicate skin, and the mobile mouth which showed each changing mood: lovable in her earnestness, her simplicity, her quick intelligence, her new-born gentleness? It mattered little, after all, whether she came of a good stock, while she was herself so choice a morsel.

'When shall we two meet again?' he asked on the day when he took her and his little sister back to Hamelford.

He and Freda were alone together in the

little parlour at the school-house, and he had hold of both her hands. In spite of his assertions and Miss Morton's impending entrance, he *was* greatly disposed to philander.

'I can't get on long without you, Freda. If you don't appear very shortly, I give you fair warning that I shall come down with my slate and satchel, and establish myself on one of the benches yonder; or else I shall pack all your scholars out of doors, and get you to myself.'

'That's a terrible threat, certainly. Would it pacify you if I were to come to Hawkstone again on Saturday, just to stay over Sunday, you know?'

'It might have a soothing effect; but mustn't I show my face here before then?'

'No,' she said doubtfully, — then more decidedly, 'Indeed I would sooner you didn't. I ought to be of some use here, and I could settle to nothing if there were a chance of your coming in at any minute. There's Aunt Becky's step on the stairs.

Good-bye, Steenie, till Saturday. Won't you come half-way to meet us?'

'No; I'll come all the way and fetch you. What time shall I be here?'

'Not till after dinner. I must do my morning's work first. Good-bye again.'

Yet, for all her bravery, it seemed to her when he had gone as though she were left there in captivity.

Many a time, before the appointed Saturday, she half repented that she had bid him keep away. It was so hard when he was not by to realise all that had befallen her. She might murmur to herself 'Stephen loves me,' but the whispered words were not satisfying. They would not call up the keen sense of pride and pleasure that came with the sight of his goodly face, the sound of his endearing words. Even the little notes he sent her had something unreal about them to her fanciful imagination; and if she tried to picture his hand forming the bold strokes and dashes in his own sitting-room at Hawkstone, the vision faded even as it was created,

and the written paper that she held seemed to belong to the dream-world. But soon she should see him again in the flesh. She should hear him say how much he had missed her; she should feel his lingering touch upon her hair. With almost feverish impatience she counted the passing hours, and fretted inwardly that they lagged on so slowly. And now at last it was here, the looked-for morning! and after mid-day she might begin expecting him. But their meeting was to come sooner than she had reckoned upon; for before the school-work began Miss Morton grimly announced that she intended herself to undertake it all.

'I shall have it thrown on my hands before long, and the sooner I get accustomed to it the better. And so, as there's nothing to keep you here, you may as well be off at once. And you need not hurry back; Monday or Tuesday will be all the same to me.'

It was ungraciously put, but Freda was in no mood to be critical; and she and

Lottie were very shortly equipped for their walk and well on their way, carrying between them the bag which contained their modicum of luggage.

'We shall take Steenie and mother by surprise,' Freda said gaily to the little girl, as they climbed the first steep hill out of the town. 'We shall be peeping in at the dining-room window almost before they have finished breakfast. Listen! the clock is chiming out ten now. We ought to be there before eleven, if we don't loiter by the way. Ah! there's a blue butterfly, but you won't catch it. It is too quick for you,' and she laughed merrily as the child sprang forward, clutched at the fluttering insect, and then looked blankly at her own empty hands.

'You had better try to catch me instead,' she suggested consolingly: 'see, I'll carry the bag, and we'll have a race to the next milestone;' and so saying she started off lightly, with the little girl at her heels.

This time Lottie had better luck, for

Freda let herself be overtaken before they reached the winning-post. Then, just where the country road struck away from the moor and down into the valley, they both sat down to recover breath on a sweet-smelling bed of thyme.

Freda was merrier this morning than Lottie had ever seen her, and the two together were very full of fun and frolic. Perhaps Lottie enjoyed it all the more because she had been somewhat thrust aside of late; but of this she did not often complain, for her fretful moods were rare now; and when her friend was busy she found amusement for herself. Still she was eager to plan the fine doings there should be when Freda really came to live at Hawkstone.

'We'll have such fun!' she exclaimed gleefully.

'Won't we! I've quite as many schemes as you, Lottie, and grander ones too perhaps. But are you rested and ready to start again? I think we'll go by the moor. We shall get the breeze, and the sun is not so very hot yet.'

So they turned into the narrow path that led upward between the furze bushes; and soon they were out on the open moorland, treading down the flowery heath and breathing the soft summer air. Here and there a grey lichen-covered rock cropped up out of the ground, giving some slight shelter from wind or weather to the browsing sheep. White fleecy clouds were sailing slowly across the blue heavens, casting fitful lights and shadows over the moor, and the bees were humming incessantly about the gorse blossoms. Lottie had dropped behind to gather a handful of the purple heather glowing on every side, and Freda wandered slowly on alone. She was in no great haste now; nay, rather she was willing to prolong the keen pleasure of anticipation, to imagine beforehand Stephen's look and greeting when he should come to welcome her. There was no danger of disappointment. There was the joyful certainty of this welcome, to which she was drawing nearer every moment; a certainty still so new to

her, poor girl, that she hardly knew how to hug it close enough. Lottie's voice calling to her from behind broke in upon her reverie, and she turned round. She had but just passed a jutting crag, the largest on the moor; and, as she stopped and beckoned to the child, she was startled by a sudden rustling hard by; and out in front of her there leapt two huge rams, almost knocking her over in their headlong course. It was not she, however, who had disturbed them. A man, who had been lying at full length close under the great rock not five yards off, had raised himself hastily on his elbow and was looking at her. She could not see him very distinctly in the deep shadow, and for a second or the fourth part of a second she thought that it was Stephen. Then her bewildered gaze took in a sailor's dress, a dark tanned face, a pair of bright intent eyes, and rock and earth and sky seemed to reel around her.

'Is it you, Mark?'

Her voice sounded to herself faint and frightened and far off; but the effort of speaking brought back her consciousness, and sent the blood coursing wildly through her veins. He had risen, and stood but a few paces from her. Now he came still nearer, but he did not hold out his hand.

'Yes, it is I. Did you think it was my ghost?'

He spoke in a cold mocking tone, and his big dark eyes stared back into hers.

'I don't know what I thought,' she returned, rallying her scattered senses. 'I did not expect to find you behind the Razor-stone. I did not even know you were in Hamelford.'

'No! I suppose not. I only came last night. As I'd nothing better to do I thought I might as well stroll up here this morning. The moor is free to everyone.'

Just then Lottie came bounding up.

'See, Freda, what a bunch!' and then she stopped and looked open-mouthed at the stranger.

'Who is she?' demanded Mark, unceremoniously glancing at her and then back at Freda.

'She is Lottie Redgrave. We are going to her home;' and Freda made a slight movement, as if to turn. She felt as if she *could* not stand there facing him; as if somehow she must get away.

He saw the action instantly. 'And you are wanting to get to your journey's end,' he said, with a sort of smile—not a pleasant smile to see. 'I won't keep you.'

'Shall you be long in Hamelford?' Freda asked, hardly knowing what she said.

'No,' he returned, in the same hard careless tone as before. 'I only came for a bit of business that I'd left undone last year. I've got through it pretty nearly, and there's nothing else to keep me in that hole yonder,' nodding towards the town.

There was a pause, and then he added abruptly—

'And so, as I'm not likely to be up

here when you come back, I'll bid you good-day.'

'But we are not coming back,' explained little Lottie. 'We are going to stay at Hawkstone till Tuesday.'

'Ah! And Hawkstone is just below the wood yonder, isn't it?' said Mark, jerking his thumb over his left shoulder, and addressing himself to the child. Then, as she nodded and was about to speak, he went on—'I remember it. A pleasant walk to you both!'

He was not going to shake hands, but Freda half putting out hers he took it, and for a moment their palms touched coldly, nervelessly. The bright eyes, brighter than ever, looked not at her but beyond her; and then wheeling about, Mark sauntered round the corner of the Razor-stone and disappeared.

But Freda stood still for a moment when he had left her. *Could* it really be Mark? That was the first confused thought in her mind as her eyes followed him. That he

should be lying up there upon the moor was strange enough, but that he should be what she now saw him was stranger far. He did not look ill; his bearing was erect, his colouring healthy, but his face was utterly transformed by those scoffing smiles, that hard expression. And it was not only in his face that such a change was wrought; his voice, his manner, his very step, all told the same tale of fierce recklessness. What had he been doing with himself? Had the neighbours' old prophecy come true after all—was he treading in his father's steps? Or had some bitter trouble fallen on him, and turned him desperate? Even as she so debated, a burning anger rose within her at the recollection of his words and bearing. Be his trouble what it might, she had deserved no such treatment at his hands. He was free to neglect her, to forget her, but he should never again show her this rude contempt. She would never come in his way again if she could help it. So she vowed inwardly, as she set her face again towards Hawkstone and hastened her steps

thitherward. She had no part nor lot in him and his concerns. Good or bad, prosperous or undone, his path in life lay far apart from hers and Stephen's. A little while and she would be at Stephen's side; and, instead of that frigid touch which had but just now chilled her hand, she would have his clasp to warm it into life again.

Lottie, as she tripped along by her side, wondered at her silence and her impetuous pace — wondered most of all when they descended the hill-side into the Hawkstone meadows, and she was sent on alone to play 'bo-peep' at the drawing-room window.

Stephen, coming out soon afterwards in search of Freda, found her standing by a quaint stone basin in the further garden watching the gold and silver fish as they darted to and fro round a tiny fountain. She looked up at him with a momentary smile when he joined her, returned his eager caress, and unbidden passed her arm through his; but when he would have turned with her towards the house she held him back.

'Not yet; stay here a few minutes.'

He submitted readily enough; he rather enjoyed humouring her fancies.

'So you lured me out here that you might have me all to yourself? I didn't give you credit for such craft, Freda mine.'

'Yes! I wanted to have you to myself—all to myself!'

'I'm sure you're very welcome.'

Then moving so as to stand in front of her, and, putting his hands on her two shoulders, he said laughingly and yet with some latent seriousness—

'And now let me inspect you, for it seems to me those pale cheeks of yours are paler than ever this morning. I hope it is due to our separation.'

She took his hands in her own and clasped them tight, but she did not respond to his smile, and he noticed with surprise that she was trembling.

'Don't, Steenie,' she said, before he could speak again. 'Don't joke just now; I want

to tell you something.' Then, unconsciously tightening her grasp—'Mark Cameron has come back. I have met him this morning upon the moors.'

'Have you?' said Stephen; there was just a shade of disquiet in his voice. But it passed instantly, and drawing her to him he asked her in his own easy natural tone—

'And did he do or say anything to frighten or vex you, dear, that you look so scared?'

'He did not frighten me; we only spoke together for a minute, but he looked at me as if I were a dog. And he has no right to despise me now that——'

She stopped, and hiding her face against his arm broke into sudden tears. Tears were so little in her line, or Stephen's either, that he hardly knew how to treat them. But he held her tenderly as she clung to him, and waited patiently until she looked up and whispered vehemently—

'I can't bear to remember that we were

ever friends. I can't bear to know that he is in the place. The sight of him, the thought of him is hateful to me.'

'Then don't let's think of him,' said Stephen, kindly lifting the agitated face and kissing it. 'There's not the least need that we should. He isn't likely to trouble us much up here, even if he stays in Hamelford.'

'He won't stay; he is going away to-night.'

'That's rather a pity. I was just thinking that I might make him an excuse for keeping you here the longer. You wouldn't object, would you?'

'No, no!' she exclaimed with passionate earnestness. 'I wish you could. I am happy with you always, and you love me. Oh, I wish I could stay!'

He smiled, and kissed her again.

'Well, remember you have my free per mission. And now come down to the water with me. The fishing-tackle is all ready, and we won't let Mark Cameron spoil our sport.'

So they went together through the meadows to the stream, and he taught her how to throw a fly across the dusky pools between the rocks where the cunning trout were likeliest to lurk.

END OF VOL. I.

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